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AUTHOR OF 'ROBIN GRAY' 'THE GOLDEN SHAFT' 'A HEART'S PROBLEM'
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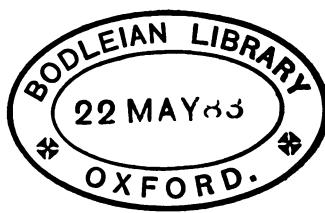
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Inscribed to

My Friend

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In grateful recognition

of much well-timed kindness and advice

and in pleasant memory of

many genial hours





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OF HIGH DEGREE.

CHAPTER I.

THE PAST IS DEAD. THE FUTURE ——?

A MAN and a woman out at the end of the long pier of Southend-on-Sea. Their names were Stephen Meredith and Ruth Clark.

To be out at the end of this pier is as good as being at sea. Some people would think it better than being at sea ; there is no unpleasant motion to disturb digestion or upset the equilibrium of the body ; and that stomach must be of the diseasedly squeamish kind which, under these conditions, prevents the enjoyment of the fresh breeze and the murmur and plash of the

water. The air was sharp, but not unpleasantly so ; the long black line of the pier melted in the distance as it reached toward the land, where the few lights of the town were only dimly visible. The tide was out, and the large space which was left uncovered looked like a huge fantastic chessboard, with its beds of mussels mingling with pools which were turned into silver shields by the moonlight ; the stranded boats of many sizes were the men of the game, waiting to be moved.

In the offing were sundry black masses huddled together ; the initiated knew them to be Dutch craft, laden with eels for Billingsgate.

The man and woman were gazing along the silver roadway, and watching the distant Nore light appearing and disappearing. The sea, to some lookers on, is only ‘ a great extent of water,’ subject to winds and tides and a vast source of profit and loss ; to others it is always full of strange suggestions of hope and despair,

fascination and terror. Stephen Meredith and Ruth Clark belonged to the latter class of sea-gazers.

They were in absolute solitude. The cabin, which serves as a refreshment room in the season, and the residence of some one having duties in connection with the pier, was closed. A man had suddenly appeared, like a pantomime goblin, from the depths of the lower platform; but he was nothing more terrible than a sailor who had come from one of the outlying vessels with a small boat to take his skipper home when that worthy had finished his evening's amusement ashore.

‘Good evening,’ said this kindly goblin, vaguely, seeing the two occupants of the pier, and good-naturedly sauntered landward, his heavy boots making a dull hollow sound on the wooden road.

Then they were alone. The light shimmered along the silver roadway—glittering laughter,

OF HIGH DEGREE.

fancy might have called it—and the water was lapping round the feet of the pier with a low, crooning sound.

They were painfully conscious of being alone, for their hearts, which had been so close that they seemed one, had come to an abrupt halt, when they started and drew back from each other—dumb, bewildered, quivering—not knowing or able to think about what was to happen next.

The woman was perfectly calm; the man was trying to appear so. He was resting over the rails. She was standing erect and dark as Fate—except her face, which was clear in the moonlight; his face was shadowed by his hat, and both were looking out upon the same silvery roadway, which came laughing to their feet.

He, an ordinary enough mortal, in a dark Chesterfield overcoat and low-crowned felt hat, no muffler and no gloves; thick, short, black

whiskers, beard, and moustache. She, a tall, graceful figure, dressed in perfect fashion—that is, the fashion which impresses you with the feeling that the woman is beautifully dressed without suggesting one thought of colour, material, or shape. Man or woman, you can never describe the dress of such a person in a milliner's sense five minutes after you have been privileged to look upon him or her.

Ruth Clark always dressed plainly because she liked it; and she was unaffectedly plain because she had no sense of a desire to attract attention by her simplicity of attire. The face on which the moon was shining was pale as with much anxious thought; irregular in feature, but in form and expression it displayed a beauty whose light outshone the moon's—that of good heart and intellect. It was an honest face.

When he lifted his head to look at her, his

seemed to be an honest face too ; and although there was an inflection of impatience in his voice as he spoke, there was sincerity in the tone. The very irritation in it would have told a sympathetic ear that he loved her.

‘There’s a droll question, Ruth ; why is it that mere flirtation is always sweet and that love is bitter ?’

The question was flung at her in a reckless, devil-may-care way, as if he would not be altogether sorry if it did hurt her, although he did not really want to do so. She answered it quite gravely, but with a shade of mocking severity on her lip—

‘I suppose it is because one is froth and the other is the body, which, like all substantial things, you know, is charged with a certain percentage of acid.’

She was so placid and so precise in that answer.

‘Oh ! ——’

The man stopped himself, got up, walked as far as the lifeboat, and came back.

‘Do you know what I was going to say?’ he asked, with forced calmness. ‘I was going to say that this sort of thing cannot go on—I was going to say—damn it, do you wish to part?’

The moon was shining through the white mist on the faces of both. The water was murmuring a hushaby to the feet of the pier; the silver path across the water still lay before them, and the distant light of the Nore was appearing and disappearing.

She answered very deliberately, but evidently with a great effort to conceal her emotion—

‘Yes.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous—if you can help it,’ was his sharp rejoinder; ‘you know that we cannot part.’

‘I know that we do not wish to part, but it must be.’

‘Why?’

She did not answer. He took another turn to the lifeboat and back. It was not merely that he was fond of her—that she was the kind of woman to attract attention and probably serve very well as the mistress of a household, but he believed that she loved him. He knew that he loved her, and his conviction was that his life would be a truer and a better one if she were by his side than it could be if she were elsewhere.

He planted himself before her.

‘You have not told me why? You say I am not a fool, Ruth. Very well; few people are able to make sure in their own minds on that point. But of this I am sure—that mad, stupid, and unreasonable as my love for you may be, it is the spring from which I draw strength, hope, and life. Do you believe me?’

She did not answer.

‘At least you owe me some fuller explanation,’ he went on, speaking rapidly, ‘than you have given me in simply stating that it is your wish that we should part. I cannot believe that you are afraid of what difficulties we may have to meet; and until you tell me with your own lips that it is so, I will not believe that you do not care for me.’

‘If I were to tell you that I did not care for you,’ she said in a low distressed tone, ‘would that satisfy you? Would you be content then to go your way through the world and forget me?’

‘If I believed you, I should hate you,’ he replied, with a short laugh, which assured her by the very bitterness of its sincerity that he had no notion of believing her, and therefore was not likely to hate her. He drew her arm through his own and pressed it close to him. ‘Now, this is some nonsense, Ruth, kindly meant, I have no doubt; but we must get rid

of it. Come, take a turn, and then see if you can tell me what it all means.'

She walked with him, clinging to his arm, and yet there was an occasional startled look in her eyes as if she wanted to fly away from him.

'I wish you would not insist. I have told you that circumstances have arisen which render it necessary for me to break off our engagement. I have thought it over—you cannot understand with what cruel pain!—and I can find no alternative in order to be just to you and myself. I can find no other way of proving how much I care for you. I am decided, and have no more to say.'

'But this is not fair to me. I have a right to know your reasons for deciding to act in this strange way.'

'You would not think my reasons were sufficient—you would feel bound to repudiate them.'

‘That is the strongest argument of all why you should not be permitted to act upon them without giving me a chance of convincing you that you are doing wrong, or of being convinced myself that you are doing right. I know that my position is an embarrassing one; that at present my income is small and is heavily taxed by my mother and sisters; but we considered all these things before, and they are no more in our way now than they were a month ago.’

There was a movement on her part as if the breeze had given her a sudden chill. He drew her under the shelter of the lifeboat, and she tightened her scarf.

‘It is getting cold; we must go back. I know that you are vexed with me, and I am sorry; but it cannot be helped. I know that my conduct is strange; some day you will perhaps understand it and forgive it—when you are quite calm and have overcome the feeling

of disappointment with which you must regard me at present. You think, of course, that you cannot get over it, but you will soon do that, and you will be grateful to me. And you will be happy. Now let us go.'

'No, not yet. If you are determined to pursue this stubborn and mysterious way of yours, you must first answer—have you found another lover ?'

'You know I have not.'

That was her only reproach ; but the suspicion had more effect in disturbing the calmness she had succeeded in preserving up to this point than anything he had previously said.

'Forgive the question ; but think of what you are doing, and you will own that it is not unnatural. You cast aside all that has passed between us. You bid me return your letters. You tell me that mine are lying ready for me at Kenerton. And you give me no better



reason for this change than that you think it should be made for my sake. I say that there can be nothing to account for such a change, except the discovery on your part that you never have really cared for me, and that you are simply anxious to be free. What other reason can there be? You would not hesitate to explain it if there were any other.'

'Think what you will, Stephen, I believe I am acting the truest and kindest part in leaving you. I wish we could have spoken quietly about it. I would have liked to remember the last evening we spent alone together, as one on which I proved my love for you in doing this thing; and you proved your love for me by trusting the tenderness of my motives. That cannot be, it seems, and we need not talk more about it.'

'I will not regard this as final. There is only one way in which you can make me alter, and you are not able to adopt it. Until you

do so I shall persist in my belief that you are acting under the influence of some foolish whim, and that you will come back to yourself and to me.'

' You are mistaken. My resolution cannot be altered. The past is dead.'

' And the future ? '

' And in the future our ways must be very different from what we once expected them to be.'

He could not comprehend the situation. Had there been passion of any kind in her words or manner ; had he committed some error of which she had a right to complain, then it would have been easy to understand it. But here was no complaint, no anger, only deep sorrow, and yet no visible reason for the suffering she was inflicting on herself and on him. This was no petty quarrel ; she was acting from the calm conviction that what she was doing was right and unavoidable. He



knew the strong, earnest nature of the woman, and after the first outburst of impatience and indignation he, too, became pale and calm.

‘So be it, Ruth ; I shall dispute the matter no more with you to-night. But in virtue of our love, and of the hopes which it still inspires in me at least, I claim the right to seek the motives which have moved you to this cruel resolve, and then to act for you and for myself as I may think best.’

‘As you will.’

She did not tell him that long before he could discover her motives she would be far beyond the reach of his influence. She had barely hinted at the long, bitter struggle with herself through which she had arrived at the conclusion that they must part ; and that she must not give him another opportunity to tempt her to change her mind. She could not answer for herself, she loved him so ! The trial had



been already almost too much for her. And there was the terrible lonely future before her.

Then they turned their backs upon that silver roadway which seemed to have been inviting them to follow its pleasant course, and in silence they traversed the long black line of the pier through the white mist to the land.

‘ You will be at Kemerton to-morrow night ? ’ she said, as they were parting.

‘ Yes, unless there is a message from Mr. Dotridge telling me that I am not wanted. You know we can never be sure of his humour.’

CHAPTER II.

‘THOU SHALT NOT LOVE OR HATE.’

ENTERING the room from the well-lighted hall was like passing suddenly into a fog where a single torch is illuminating one small circle. The upper part of the room was in darkness, and only the writing table was lit by the large, thickly-shaded lamp.

Ruth Clark was seated at this table, and the upper part of her face was in shadow, whilst the mouth and chin were fully displayed. That mouth was one which could be stern as well as tender. She had raised the pen to her lips signifying to the man who had just entered that he was to be silent. The man had already closed the door, and he waited.

A low voice was heard dictating ; Ruth's pen travelled rapidly over the paper. Her knowledge of the speaker's ways enabled her without apparent difficulty to separate all the parenthetical observations from the matter she was required to write.

'These things I wish to have carefully noted now (was that Stephen ? He is to wait) lest anything should prevent me from preparing the fuller statement which has been (take a seat) unfortunately already too long delayed. I have several times attempted to prepare this statement, but have been unable to overcome my reluctance or repugnance to approach the subject. But as my faithful friend——'

The voice stopped for a moment as if the speaker were debating something with himself. Then—

'I think that is the simplest way of putting it. . . . But as my faithful friend, Ruth Clark, is about to leave me on a long voyage, and as I

feel that there is no one else to whom I am so likely to confide these matters, I make this effort now. Is that correctly put?’

‘I think your meaning is quite clear.’

There was something eerie in that dark room, with its one circle of light, and the voice of the invisible speaker dictating his last wishes. During the pauses he made, there was perfect stillness in the place. There were none of the customary signs of its being a sick chamber, for as soon as one’s eyes became accustomed to the kind of fog, they discovered that everything was orderly. The furniture was plain but rich in material, and constructed chiefly for the comfort of the body. The prevailing colour was a sombre brown, scarcely relieved by the few pictures, and the lighter shades of the curtains and other hangings. A closed stove regulated the temperature, but concealed the cheerful glow of the fire.

The speaker was Humphrey Dotridge ; the place was Kemerton Park, Dunthorpe.

He was seated behind a large screen, in order to shield his eyes from the light, as he liked to dispense, as much as possible, with the green shade which usually guarded them.

The pause was long. Ruth sat motionless, ready to catch the first words that were uttered ; Stephen Meredith was resting on the back of a chair, watching her with curious, inquiring eyes, and apparently taking little interest in the words of his cousin from the moment he had heard that Ruth was about to leave Kemerton on a long voyage.

She had not told him that when they were on the pier at Southend, and yet it must have been in her mind all the time she had been speaking. Why ? What was there to conceal from him ?

Again the voice, and this time there was

something pathetically self-reproachful in its tone—

'I am afraid I shall have to stop again, Ruth. I thought it possible to go on in Stephen's presence, and have been trying, but it is no use.'

'Would you like Mr. Meredith to leave us for a little?'

'That would not make any difference now. Besides, I would rather he heard me, for you know he has more to do with the matter than he at present suspects.'

'But if my presence interferes with you, what is the use of my staying?' said Meredith, coldly.

'Stay, please; this is only a ridiculous sentiment which has no particular association with you, and I wish to overcome it. . . . *I am desirous that Dahlia Whitcombe should be treated in every respect as my daughter* (Ruth's pen went on again); *and have made such*

provision for her as that relationship might require of me. I do this on account of her mother, for the unhappiness of whose life I hold myself greatly to blame. That will do.'

The latter words were spoken in an exhausted tone, and silence ensued.

By-and-by the screen was gently thrust aside and Mr. Dotridge showed himself.

A man of average height, wearing a thick, grey dressing-gown. So far as the iron-grey whiskers, beard, and moustache, and the eye-shade he had now put on, permitted them to be seen, the features were regular but pinched from the effects of illness.

He went slowly to the writing-table, and signed his name.

‘The rest must be done another time. Will you witness the signature, Stephen. . . . Thank you. Now we can sit down and talk over our affairs.’



Mr. Dottridge resumed his seat behind the screen, and Meredith took a chair close by him. Ruth proceeded methodically to fold the papers and place them in a deed box which lay beside her, and a sense of stillness for a few minutes pervaded the place again.

‘I had two objects in asking you to come to me this evening, Stephen,’ said Mr. Dottridge, ‘and the first can be easily disposed of, as it was to speak about myself.’

‘I thought that was always the most important subject a man could have to speak about,’ commented Meredith, carelessly, for his thoughts were full of Ruth and the long voyage.

‘Undoubtedly, and I do not pretend that it is of less importance to me than it is to other men; but I can control the length of the debate upon it. So I can promise it shall be a short one.’

‘I am quite at your service; and first, I

should like to know what was the result of the consultation of your physicians to-day.'

'And that was the first thing I was going to tell you. The doctors have decided that I *may* live for years—'

'That is good news!' exclaimed Meredith, warmly.

'You have not heard the "but." But the condition is that I am not to be subjected to any sudden excitement, and that I must not even lose my temper! I smile at the difficult nature of the condition even to a man as phlegmatic as a Dutchman; to me—a nervous, irritable creature, as you know—the idea of fulfilling it for any length of time is absurd.'

'But your doctors may be mistaken as to the extreme precariousness of your case.'

'I wish to hope that they are mistaken; but they have assured me that the symptoms cannot be misconstrued. Therefore, knowing that any trifling incident which may quicken

the heart's action is almost certain to prove instantly fatal, I have arranged my affairs. I shall do what can be done to preserve myself; but it is a droll fate to know that one exists only on condition of remaining insensible equally to joy and sorrow.'

Mr. Dotridge repeated all this calmly, and as if he were talking of some acquaintance whose case interested him, rather than of himself.

Meredith was silent. It is always difficult to reply to a friend who tells you that he has settled his worldly affairs and has now nothing to do but await his summons ; it is most difficult when you know that there is a probability of your deriving some advantage from his departure. To be cheery and hopeful of days yet in store is apt to be taken for hypocrisy ; and to refer to the 'Higher Hope' is decidedly suggestive of speeding the parting guest.

Meredith knew that he had something to

expect on the death of his cousin ; and their relationship, although not unfriendly, had not been cordial. Therefore he found it particularly awkward to speak at this moment.

Mr. Dotridge was either too much absorbed in speculations on his own position to heed the silence, or he understood it and passed on. Certainly considerations of others' conduct can have small importance in the eyes of a man living under that most terrible form of the sword of Damocles—the knowledge that any emotion of pain or joy can only be indulged in under the penalty of death. That was the position of Humphrey Dotridge, and so far he had accepted it calmly enough. Reckoned by years he was only in middle life, at the period when healthy men are said to be in their prime ; he had money, and he had a fair share of the capacities requisite for enjoying it wisely. But this doom had been pronounced :—‘ You must neither love nor hate.



The moment you swerve from the dull straight course of physical routine and mental equanimity, you die !' It was doubtful whether or not the conscious necessity of avoiding agitation might not provoke it.

‘You see I must maintain perfect indifference about everything,’ he went on, ‘and it is not an agreeable life to look forward to; but this will enable you to understand why I do not attempt to discuss any of my arrangements with you. The papers already prepared will explain everything, and Mr. Bassnett will communicate with you. So much for my first object in sending for you; now for the second —yourself.’

Meredith felt more sympathy for his rich cousin than he had ever done before. Their natures were in many respects dissimilar—that fact and accident had kept them much apart; their meetings on pleasure had been of the formal kind, and their meetings on business

had been always painful to Meredith on account of the state in which his father's misfortunes had left the affairs of the family. But he was conscious that whatever was unpleasant in these interviews had been due rather to his own sensitive way of looking at things than to intentional unkindness on the part of his cousin.

'I have nothing satisfactory to tell you about myself, and it seems to me that it would be the best course to leave everything to Mr. Bassnett.'

'You need not be afraid of disturbing me by anything you may have to say on that score; I think the worst is known to me. Your speculations in Australian wool have turned out badly, and the land improvements have not yet yielded any result. That is the worst.'

'That is the worst at present.'

'Then things will mend if you can wait long enough.'

‘Yes, but the waiting is the difficulty. There are your——’

Mr. Dottridge raised his hand, checking the reference to the obstacle which he knew was in Meredith’s mind.

‘You ought to know that you need have no uneasiness about that. It is more your father’s affair than yours, and I have devised a plan which will enable you to arrange everything satisfactorily. On that head see Bassnett, and understand that we are not to speak of it again. Now, let us turn to what I hope is a more agreeable subject. You know Dahlia Whitcombe returns to-morrow.’

‘Yes; my mother told me.’

‘Then she has also told you that, as I wish the girl to have the pleasures which are suitable to her years, and which she cannot have here owing to my peculiar condition, I have asked Mrs. Meredith to act as her guardian, and to give her a home at Derewood.’

‘The people at home are all delighted with the idea,’ observed Meredith, in a tone which suggested that the prospect did not inspire him with any special delight.

‘You have no objection, I hope?’

‘Oh, no! not an objection exactly. I should be glad to have her as a guest, but I cannot profess any relish for taking her in as a lodger.’

‘I trust you will regard her as a friend and relative,’ said Mr. Dotridge very deliberately, ‘after what you heard me dictating this evening.’

That brought Stephen straight to the subject which had been uppermost in his thoughts all the time. Ruth’s place at the writing table was now vacant.

‘Be it as you please. I understand the necessity for the arrangement, and Miss Whitcombe shall be made welcome.’

‘Thank you, Stephen. I know she will be happy with you.’

‘I shall do my best not to get in her way. Now will you explain one thing which has puzzled me very much to-night? As you spoke of it so quietly, I conclude there can be no danger of disturbing you by referring to it again. Why is Ruth Clark going away, and where is she going to?’

There was a long pause, but there was not the slightest movement to indicate that Mr. Dottridge was distressed by the question, but his voice was somewhat colder than it had been as he replied :—

‘I am unable to explain her reasons for going away, but I am satisfied that they are good ones. I believe her destination is Australia, and you can understand that her determination is a grievous trial to me.’

That was all Mr. Dottridge had to say on the subject, and Stephen’s impatience made him glad to be able to leave the room almost immediately.

CHAPTER III.

RIGHT OR WRONG?

STEPHEN's purpose was to inquire at once for Ruth ; but he was spared that trouble. Brassey was waiting for him.

Brassey was Mr. Dotridge's butler and confidential servant, and in his plain black suit, with his thin white hair, trim whiskers, and sedate manner would have been mistaken for a guest by any stranger, but for the art he had acquired by long training of letting you understand at once without servility that he was your respectful servant.

‘ This is a note for you, sir, and Miss Clark desired me to give it to you myself.’

Here in the wide old-fashioned hall there was plenty of light from the big lamp swinging in the centre of the ceiling, and the smaller lamps in sconces on the inner walls. It was one of the master's hobbies that, although he was obliged to remain in darkness, there should be light enough for everybody else outside his rooms.

Stephen read the lines—

‘Grant me this favour—do not ask to see me to-night; I am not able to stand another interview.

‘Believe me, yours TRULY,

‘R. C.’

He noted that the ‘yours truly,’ with the ‘truly’ twice underlined, had been inserted as an afterthought; the position of the words and the colour of the ink told him that. Also he noted that she signed her initials instead of ‘Ruth’ as had been her custom. He became

slightly pale, and his brows drew together forming two upright wrinkles.

‘Is there anyone in the parlour?’ he asked, and his voice was quite steady.

‘No, sir; but Mr. Rapier and Mr. Bassnett are in the billiard room. There will only be your three selves at dinner, I understand, as Miss Clark is not coming down.’

‘Come here, Brassey; I want you to take a message to her,’ said Stephen, as he passed into the parlour.

On a side table he found writing materials.

‘I shall wait here for half an hour. Tell me when this ridiculous mystery is to end, if not to-night. The absurdity of it makes me impatient.

‘Yours, always the same,

‘STEPHEN.’

Brassey observed the young man with a kindly paternal interest, but he took the note

from him and retired without any sign of a desire to intrude upon his confidence. According to his own way of thinking he had no need to seek confidence, for the whole thing was as plain as a stain on silver to him. He knew that they were lovers.

‘They’ve been having a tiff somehow—how is a puzzle to me,’ was the old man’s reflection, ‘for it beats all my skill to make out how anybody could contrive to quarrel with Miss Clark —bar a sweetheart. Glad they took me to help them make it up instead of one of the maids. I can hold my tongue, I hope.’

Stephen knew that he was made of irritable stuff, and when left alone his inclination was to take a quick march up and down the room to keep himself calm ; but on second thoughts he concluded that he would succeed best by remaining fixed in one position ; so he put one hand in his pocket, a foot on the fender, rested his elbow on the high, massive mantelpiece,

and glared into the fire, on which a huge log was burning with many-coloured flaines. Here, too, there were brightness and cheeriness, in marked contrast with the sombre arrangements of the master's room.

Looking into the bright fire, Stephen made a brave effort to grasp the whole position of affairs, and those playful flames seemed to help him to see faces and events.

There was he, the inheritor of a small property and large encumbrances, his mother and a band of girls to support, and a younger brother to set up in a profession. He was the descendant of a yeoman family having traditions of which he was proud, and he desired to maintain his place in the county. He could work and had worked. He was a fairly good farmer, and would have been successful if it had not been for his passion for scientific experiments in everything pertaining to agriculture. And he had a secret hankering after bold speculation,

although generally in matters about which he knew something, as wool and foreign cattle. The gambling spirit of the father, which had been a source of much trouble, had appeared in the son, but happily in the direction of business speculation.

Knowing the position of his affairs he had avoided matrimony—the fact of his being constantly surrounded by girls helped him to do that, no doubt—until he had seen Ruth Clark. Then after a good trial of what his own feelings meant, and after he had tested hers as he thought, he said to himself simply, 'I have found my mate,' and set himself to discuss ways and means with her: She calmly considering how everything might be best arranged for everybody, and almost leaving herself out of her proper place in the count: He impetuously urging that they should take the future bravely in their hands, and trust to honest endeavour on both sides to bring all things right.

But she was so unlike other women ; strong, self-reliant, without that affectation of manliness which makes the ‘advanced’ woman only coarse ; tender without gush, and wise without being too conscious of it. She could do unpleasant things in the kindest way, and Stephen owned that she was more frequently right than he. But she had not been right in delaying the announcement of their engagement, he believed, and he was sure of it now that she wished to break it off altogether without giving any definite reason—for he did not even think that his recent losses could have anything to do with it. That was a reason for postponing the marriage perhaps ; but nothing more.

He knew that she had nothing, and he preferred that it should be so. She was a *protégée* of Mr. Dotridge, but he did not expect her to receive much from him ; that had always been well understood. She had received an exceptionally good education, which she had improved

upon by ardent study. Her parents were dead ; she had no relatives with whom she corresponded ; she was free to choose her own course in life, and she had chosen.

Stephen was content. She was Ruth and that was all he cared about. With or without fortune he was confident that there was a happy future before them.

He knew that his mother and sisters disapproved of his attachment ; but on a subject of this kind he had no intention of consulting them. They would have preferred Dotridge's adopted daughter (some said his real daughter), Dahlia Whitcombe, who would have a considerable fortune. And Dahlia was a nice enough creature, in spite of being 'a perfect beauty,' as some people called her, and certainly perfectly aware of her attractions. But although he liked her, she had never touched his thoughts as a probable wife except to produce a smile at the ideas women had of making matches any-

how. Ruth was on another plane in his thought and altogether in his heart.

But Ruth sometimes vexed and bewildered him ; then she had only to be what he called *herself* for a few minutes and he forgot the vexation and bewilderment. This time she was passing all bounds as he thought, and he was resolved to bring matters to a crisis.

At first, when she had spoken of breaking off their secret engagement, he regarded it as a jest ; the next time, as most unkind, but still a jest. The third time, when they met at Southend —whither she had been despatched on some mission by Mr. Dotridge—there could no longer be any doubt that she was in earnest. The announcement of the voyage she was about to take showed that she intended to put space between them to complete the separation.

For what purpose was this done? The thing must be made clear to him ; upon that

he was resolved. To-morrow he would proclaim their secret engagement and declare himself ready to fulfil it. If she chose then to say that she did not now care enough for him to risk her happiness in his keeping, there would be nothing for him to do but to retire and master his disappointment as quickly as possible. But as long as she continued to say that she cared for him—only for him, and could never care for another—he would be a dishonourable scoundrel to release her until he knew that there was another reason for separation than the only one he could conceive, and which he had been assured did not exist.

Separation! Good Lord!—and she had said it so quietly! Could it be possible that she had any sense of the meaning of what she was doing to him—wrecking his whole life? It was impossible. There was some contemptible secret at the bottom of it, or, as he believed, some whimsical notion of duty, or—and this he

could not believe—she did not and never had really cared for him.

He had held himself fixed in his place all the time, glaring at the fire, seeing the faces of those he was thinking about; but his brain was wrought to a wild state of excitement, although his body remained still.

‘*Mister Meredith!*’

That was the third time Brassey had spoken. Stephen started at the sound when it at last penetrated his ears. It seemed to him as if hours had elapsed since Brassey had left him. He snatched the note from the salver, and as the man retired, he read—

‘There really is no mystery. I wish to go away. I have decided it is best for me to go away. What I said to you at Southend is final. That is all. I am sorry you are grieved; I cannot see you to-night. It depends upon yourself whether or not I ever see you again.’

‘That is all.’ Yes, that was all! It was

heartlessly cruel to herself, or to him—which? Was it in nature that any human being could so inspire another with life, and joy, and hope, and love, and then so calmly take it all away? Blow it out, so to say, as we blow out the light, when it has served our purpose?

He was quiet now and cold; standing quite still, holding that paper in his hand in a dazed way, wondering about it all. The greatest calamity that he had thought could happen to him had befallen him, and he did not seem to feel anything at the moment except a sort of dull aching about his head and stomach.

Then what did all those joyful hours and days that they had lived together mean? The sunshine that her presence always made; the glorious pictures they had painted of the bright future together; the strange thrill of unspeakable happiness which the touch of her hand communicated to him, which the touch of no other hand had ever done before, or could ever

do again; what did it all mean since at a breath she could destroy it all? Surely there was something terribly wrong here in himself or in her. What was it?

In a chamber almost directly over his head was Ruth Clark. She was looking sallow and ill, and she sat rigidly in a chair, one arm resting on the table, the other lying listlessly on her lap, Stephen's note under her hand.

Her eyes were heavy and swollen, but showed no sign of tears. They seemed to be looking at some roughly tied packet of letters —his letters, but the vision was entirely turned inward.

Was this thing that she was doing right?
Was it best for him that they should separate?
So it had seemed to be when
wrestling with herself
determined upon
from the loss

forget their love (ah, that was hard to think about!), and be happy. Perhaps he would remember her kindly when he knew how much he had gained through her sacrifice. Perhaps he would even think that she had suffered something in turning away from that bright course which they had hoped to walk together. May be then, too, he would remember that silvery roadway which the moonlight made on the waters at Southend, and faintly guess how it had seemed to her distracted thought to be taunting her, and tempting her to take the bright way with him, no matter what quick-sands lay beyond. And she had resisted it for his sake, and thought that she was right!

But now, when she had struck the blow which must make him turn from her in contempt, she was filled with doubt. The spectre which had hovered over the bright path and helped her to remain firm—the spectre of the possible change in him if, wedding her now, he

should learn hereafter how much he had lost by doing so—forsook her. She saw him faithful and brave to the last. She, only, faithless in her doubt.

That spectre was more terrible than the other. Then was this thing that she was doing right?

The dull sound of the muffled gong announced dinner. Stephen was roused from his trance.

Dinner!—of course, and Bassnett—Bassnett, the lawyer, who knew everything, was to be there! Why, what an utter ass he had been, wasting precious time when he had only to step across the hall and shake hands with the very man who was commissioned to explain the whole business to him! What a fool he was!

The dull boom of the muffled gong sounded a second time, and to Ruth Clark's ears it was like a funeral knell.

CHAPTER IV.

THE WHOLE STATE OF THE CASE.

THEE was really no necessity for constraint in the dining-room, for it was at some distance from Mr. Dotridge's rooms, and the doors were padded so that when closed sounds were kept well within the walls of the apartment in which they were made. Although aware of this fact, the peculiar circumstances under which they met caused the three gentlemen to speak at first in subdued tones. There was no host, but in some mysterious way Brassey placed Stephen at the head of the table, as if it were quite a matter of course that he should be there; and Mr. Bassnett and Mr. Rapier,

also as if it were a matter of course, took the chairs arranged for them on each side of him.

Everything was at first said and done in the same subdued manner as that observed in a house where the preliminaries of a funeral are being arranged ; the servants moved about with noiseless steps, changing dishes without clatter, and Brassey even succeeded in uncorking the champagne without noise. The conversation was fitful, and no one seemed to be able to start a subject of the slightest interest to the others. The reason was simple—because they avoided the subject which was of interest to them all, and uppermost in their thoughts, namely, the affairs of Humphrey Dotridge.

Percival Bassnett, of Bassnett, Hawley, and Smart, Serjeant's Inn, solicitors, was about fifty-five in years, but, being a well-knit, active man, of sandyish complexion, always neatly dressed, and generally in shooting coat or reefer, no one would have supposed that he

was more than forty. In Serjeant's Inn he liked to be regarded as a shrewd, and rather sharp man of business, and such he really was. Outside Serjeant's Inn he liked to be regarded as a prosperous country gentleman, and so he was. He had a handsome place in the country ; he went annually to the north to shoot, and sometimes as far as Norway to shoot. He was a man of strong constitution and clear head ; one to be trusted implicitly with the most private family affairs, and admired for his success in his profession. He seldom failed to carry to a successful issue any case which he took in hand ; but then he was very careful about the nature of the cases he undertook.

He ate his dinner and took his wine with relish ; leisurely, as if he recognised the duty he owed to his digestion, the respect he owed to good victuals, and the importance of the meal in the economy of life.

Lewis Rapier was a tall, handsome man, with short, thick, glossy black hair and moustache. Soft oval face, bright blue eyes, and an expression of thorough content with himself and everything else. He looked as if he had never known care, and had somewhat of a military bearing—frank, firm, and stalwart. Little was known about him, except that he was a particular friend of the proprietor of Kemerton. It was vaguely understood that he had been formerly in the army, that he had at one time held a high command under the Sultan, and that he was a sleeping partner in some city firm. He had chambers in Albemarle Street, and his permanent address was the Cosmos Club, St. James's Street. He had been for some time such a frequent guest at Kemerton that he was quite at home there, and the apartment he occupied during his visits was spoken of by the domestics as Mr. Rapier's room.



He, too, ate and drank with relish, but in the easy fashion of a man who, blessed with a good digestion, could afford to dispense with any nice discrimination as to the quality or cooking of his food. In the matter of wine and cigars, however, he was fastidious, and would rather go without them than touch an inferior brand of either of these luxuries. This idiosyncrasy was known to his friends; it made some uncomfortable and amused others. He was apparently quite unconscious of disturbing or amusing them in this respect.

Stephen scarcely spoke at all during dinner.

‘You seem dull, Meredith,’ said Rapier, good-naturedly, trying to rouse him.

‘You know how things are here—you cannot expect me to be merry.’

There was an unconscious satire in the words and manner, and Rapier was surprised.

‘I did not mean that I expected you to be merry, for of course one is always sad when a relative’s life is in danger.’

The sneer was as Stephen thought very marked. He answered it in the right way, by a frank acknowledgment of his own lack of courtesy.

‘I beg your pardon, Rapier. I know that I am churlish just now, but the cause of it has nothing to do with my cousin. I intended to speak to Bassnett alone after dinner; but there is no reason why you should not hear me, and you shall. Then you will understand why I am so much out of humour.’

‘You are in earnest about it, whatever it is,’ rejoined the other, sorry for having disturbed him; ‘and I wish you had not taken my chaff so seriously.’

‘All right. Wait a little and don’t mind me.’

When the servants had retired Stephen



began at once, scarcely waiting for his friends to fill their glasses.

‘I know your sensible objection, Bassnett, to speak of business out of business hours ; but the information I am about to ask for is not exactly of a business nature, although I expect you to be able to give it to me because of your professional connection with my cousin.’

Bassnett was sipping his Pomard very deliberately, and eying Stephen with an expression of friendly curiosity.

‘My dear Meredith,’ he said, with a kind of dry cordiality, ‘you ought to know that you should never ask a lawyer to give you information he has acquired in his professional capacity. If he is an honest man he will tell you at once that he cannot do it ; if he is a hypocrite he will pretend that he has not got it ; and if he is a rogue he will make a bargain with you for it.’

‘No breach of confidence can be involved in an answer to my question. Besides, so far as business is concerned, my cousin has told me that you have instructions to explain everything.’

‘Certainly—everything that it is necessary for you to know—and you can have the explanation as soon as you please. But you will have to come to Sergeant’s Inn.’

This was said with a smile at Stephen’s evident impatience, and the latter did not observe the qualification as to the extent of what he was to be told.

‘I did not expect you to enter into my affairs to-night. All I want to know is—Why is Miss Clark not only leaving Kemerton but England?’

‘Bless my soul! how should I know?’ exclaimed Mr. Bassnett, astounded by the nature of the question, and the importance which Stephen attached to it.

‘I thought that in discussing affairs you might have learned the reasons for this sudden determination on her part,’ urged Stephen, disappointed to find the lawyer ignorant as himself.

‘It never occurred to me to suppose that there was any other reason than that she wished to go. She has an uncle out in Australia ; and she wants to join him, and Mr. Dottridge thinks that the change would be good for her health —you know she has not been in the best possible physical condition for some time past. There is nothing singular in all that ; and no reason why you should not have the fullest information I can afford. On my word, from the way you introduced the subject, I thought you were going to demand nothing less than a full statement of the contents of my client’s private will and trust deeds.’

Mr. Bassnett laughed heartily but not loudly. He was greatly relieved to find that

the important information required from him was of such a commonplace character.

Stephen saw how lightly he regarded the subject, and if it had not been that he felt how foolish he would look in the eyes of a practical man like Bassnett, he would have told him there, and in the presence of Rapier, why the matter was of so much importance to him.

Rapier had remained perfectly quiet throughout this short passage between the lawyer and Stephen ; there had been a momentary smile on his face as he watched the latter's growing expression of dismay. He understood perfectly well why Stephen was so anxious.

‘ You have bewildered Bassnett, and as you don’t mind me listening, Meredith, perhaps you will not mind me putting in a word. I think I can help you.’

Stephen turned to him with eager eyes, in which there was no hope.

‘ How ? ’ (this huskily.)

‘By being impudent to you if you will permit me,’ answered Rapier, with a kindly laugh.

‘Be as impudent as you like, if you can help me.’

‘Look here, Bassnett, earn six-and-eight at once—tell me how to tell a man he is an egotistical fool without hurting his feelings, and laying myself open to an action for libel?’

‘Good; hand over the six-and-eight—my terms are cash,’ answered the lawyer, taking a cigar.

‘Very well, give me the tip.’

‘With pleasure. The way to avoid doing the things you refer to is—to hold your tongue. Now I shall take a light in lieu of the fee.’

‘Here you are,’ and Rapier passed the vestas to him.

‘I am waiting for you, Rapier,’ said Stephen. He knew that all this by-play was meant kindly,

not offensively, but at that moment he could not appreciate it.

‘ You don’t mind Bassnett hearing?’

‘ Of course not; go on.’

‘ Well—’ Rapier paused on the word and smoked meditatively. ‘ Well, the whole state of the case is this: You have got a particular—I must give it the real word, Meredith, for you are in earnest—you have got a particular affection for the lady, and you cannot understand why she should wish to leave England when you want her to remain. I can.’

‘ What is it? That is what I want to make out,’ cried Stephen eagerly.

‘ To an outsider the thing is very simple, if only a few of the facts of the case are known. She is a woman of considerable acuteness, very resolute in doing what she believes to be the right thing, and very quick to see what the right thing is. In the present case, she likes you well enough to wish to get out of your way,

as she feels that she does not like you well enough to risk the self-reproach that she had interfered with your prospects.'

Stephen's eyes dropped contemptuously to the table, and his fingers tapped the glass which he had forgotten to fill when he passed the wine.

'Well, what do you think of my reading of the riddle which seems to have perplexed you so much?' inquired Rapier, calmly.

'I think it is excellent,' was the sarcastic reply; 'you have got quicker eyes than Bassnett to understand me, but you do not understand her.'

'I am nearer the mark than you will believe at present. By-and-by you will tell me that I was right.'

'I wish I could make out what you two fellows are wrangling about? I see Meredith is in a temper, and you are trying to persuade him that Miss Clark is not in love with him,'

said the lawyer, helping himself to wine, and making an effort to change the subject of conversation. ‘I must say that I should take it for granted that the lady knew her own mind best, and that she shows very plainly what it is when she decides upon going to the other end of the world—that is to say, I think she can have no very strong attachment to this end of it. Now, who says billiards?’

‘I am going home to-night, so you will excuse me,’ said Stephen, rising gladly. ‘Thanks to you both, although you have not been able to give me the information I wanted.’

‘I shall do my best to satisfy you when you come to Sergeant’s Inn,’ said Bassnett, ‘but on this subject I have told you all I know.’

Rapier accompanied Stephen to the door where a groom was waiting with the latter’s horse. As they passed along the hall he took his arm familiarly, and whispered confidently in his ear—

‘I am going to make you my enemy for life, Meredith—at any rate I shall run the risk of doing so.’

‘Don’t do it then.’

‘I must. I know your feelings for Miss Clark, and respect them. I respect her and admire her. I believe she is doing you a real kindness—she means it so I am certain. She has learned that Dotridge leaves you nothing, and she does not want to encumber you with a penniless wife. That is why she is going away.’

‘Nonsense,’ returned Stephen as he mounted.

Was that a friend or an enemy?—was the question which occupied him as he rode home.



CHAPTER V.

ON BOARD THE 'EUCALYPTUS.'

THE first week in December is not a pleasant season in which to sail for the antipodes : so at least think those who are unaccustomed to the sea. But good or bad season ships go and come, and stout-hearted seamen tell you that they must take the weather as they find it, just as landsmen have to do : moreover, they prefer the sea at any time to London in a fog.

The *Eucalyptus*, first-class clipper, for Sydney bound, was lying off Greenhithe, her cargo complete, her compasses adjusted, and ready for sea. She carried few passengers—twenty in the steerage and four in the cabin. They were

all on board except one—a lady who was to occupy the chief cabin next to the captain's. The lady was Ruth Clark.

'I hope she has not missed the train,' said the Captain, looking shoreward. 'The tug is ready, and our time is up.'

'I suppose as she is the particular friend of the owner she fancies she can do as she likes with us,' said Captain Mackay's wife; and there was an indication in her tone that if the lady had any such fancy she would speedily discover her mistake.

The Captain was a burly Scot, with a round, ruddy, jovial face, and merry, twinkling little eyes. He had spent all his life at sea, beginning his career in his father's fishing smack at Arbroath, and changing into a sea-going vessel when he was fourteen. He had rapidly risen to be master, and had been for ten years commander of the *Eucalyptus*.

His wife was a little stout woman, who

insisted upon accompanying him on every voyage, in spite of the fact that she was a bad sailor, and had to spend in her cabin the greater part of the time she was at sea. But she had no children, she was fond of her 'guideman,' and would not be persuaded to remain on shore. She was not an ill-natured woman, but she did not like lady passengers. They always made such a fuss, she said, and the Captain was far too attentive to them. They could make him do anything they liked if they pretended to be ever so little out of sorts. In fact it would never do to leave him to their mercy.

'There she comes,' said the Captain, with a satisfied smile, as he put down his glass. 'You'll find her a real nice quiet lady, Betsy; and, mind, her principal reason for coming with us is because you are on board. So be guid till her.'

A small boat came alongside. Ruth as-

cended the ladder, followed by Stephen Meredith.

She was received by the captain and his wife—the latter taking a fancy to her at once, and conducting her to her cabin with many expressions of goodwill and pleasure in having such a companion for the voyage.

Stephen interchanged a few words with the Captain, who told him that they were to weigh anchor immediately, and that, as he had directed, arrangements had been made for his return with the tug when she parted with the ship. Then the Captain turned to his many duties, and Stephen stood on the deck near the cabin staircase waiting for Ruth. The other passengers were busy taking final leave of the friends who had delayed going on shore till the last moment, for the privilege of returning with the tug had not been taken advantage of by anyone except Stephen.

He was pale and tired-looking, as if he had

not slept for several nights, but he was calm. It was the calmness, however, of one who submits to a fate he cannot control although he believes it to be a cruel one, and would alter it if he could.

When Ruth, in her warm grey travelling dress, rejoined him, they walked in silence to the stern of the ship.

There was great bustle going on, a loud mingling of many tones of voices, a creaking of windlasses, the panting of the tug, the shouts and cheers of those in the small boats, answered by those on board, as the huge vessel began slowly to move away from her mooring-place. There was an effort on both sides to inspire the cheers with the gladness of hope, but the effort was damped by the consciousness of the many probabilities that they would never see each other's face again.

Ruth heard these sounds and felt their full meaning. She saw the faces and knew how

forced the smiles were, and excused those whose maudlin grief showed that they had been seeking comfort from the wrong quarter.

‘Do you hear that?’ said Stephen, bitterly. ‘A very little while, and it will be our turn.’

‘Yes,’ she replied in a low voice, looking dreamily at the boats which were dropping away from the ship; handkerchiefs waving and oars lingering, that the last look might be as long as possible.

She, too, was pale, but the features were fixed in such a mould of determination that the expression seemed hard. The thing was to be done; it was her own doing, and she, at any rate, must not add to his distress by showing any signs of the regret, the misery, and the loneliness that filled her heart. No; she was going to be brisk and resolute. He should depart with the conviction that she was a callous, unfeeling creature, rather than that he

should think of her as one who had been forced into exile.

‘The whole thing is so sudden that I cannot realise it,’ he muttered, looking down into the water. ‘I suppose it was kindly meant on your part to conceal all your arrangements until almost the eve of your sailing; but at present I cannot be grateful.’

‘Why? Do you still think that if you had known sooner you would have been able to dissuade me?’

‘Yes; I think it is possible, for I do not yet see the necessity for this voyage.’

He called it a voyage although she regarded it as exile. He had only become partially reconciled to the movement by the belief that the separation was to be temporary.

She did not answer immediately; those boats and figures in them were like shadows in the river mist now. Then—

‘Yes—I believed you might have made me

do wrong and give up this voyage,' she said softly; 'that was why my resolution was concealed from you till the last moment. I wished to spare you pain.'

'I am satisfied of that.'

'And you are content now, Stephen?'

She placed her hand on his arm, and presently he took the hand between both his own.

'I don't want to make this parting more unhappy for you than it need be,' he said, making a strong effort to speak cheerfully. 'I am content so far that this journey, which at first appeared to me such mad folly on your part, or a proof that your love had been all along a mistake, if not a falsehood—I am content to think that it is only the doorway to our happiness. You have promised that in a year you will come back to me, or I may go to you.'

'That is our bargain, and I go all the happier that we have made it.'

‘So be it, then ; in a year, you will be with me, and that prospect will help me to make good use of the time. When we next join hands you shall own that this test of our love was not needed.’

‘Do not let us talk of that any more,’ she said hastily, for she feared the effect his earnest voice might have upon her ; clearly she found it difficult to speak calmly ; there was such a lump in her throat.

‘No, we have said our say, and I ought to be trying to comfort you. But I cannot, Ruth ; for the idea is always coming back to me that if you had only told me a couple of months sooner, or if you had waited a few months longer, I could have gone with you.’

‘Stephen, you promised that if I consented to your coming so far with me you would not attempt to go over those things again,’ she said in a subdued voice, and with much agitation.

‘There—forgive me,’ he rejoined, resign-

edly. 'I have done. You are having your own way in this: you have told me that it is a test of yourself and of me, without which you could not be assured of our future happiness. I say it is a cruel test, but I submit. At the same time I cannot help asking myself, would you have required this test if your heart had been all mine, as you once made me believe it was—'

'Oh, Stephen!'

'There, again, forgive me. What an ungracious brute I am, and I wanted to make our parting hour as cheery as may be. This is a fine way to carry out my intention. And yet I don't see what I can do. To pretend to be merry is worse than being openly miserable.'

'I do not expect you to be merry. I should very likely be more unhappy in remembering that you were glad to part with me than I shall be in remembering even your reproaches.'

‘No more reproaches, then, my darling. I part with you believing that your heart is all mine, that this separation is only a painful, brief necessity, and comforted by my faith in you and in the bright future when you will come back to me, and we shall live happy ever after, as the story books say.’

There was a kind of mingled playfulness and bitterness in all this, which relieved and yet distressed her.

‘It is difficult to be cheery under the circumstances. I wonder how it will be when you are really away from me, and I am left alone with these strangers.’

‘Oh, you will soon make friends of them, and you will have pleasant enough times if the weather is good ; and if it is bad you will have no time to think of me.’

As he made out that picture he emitted something that was nearer to a laugh than any sound he had made during the day.

‘And you?’ she said, smiling and raising her eyes to his face.

‘As for me, I shall be eating a hearty dinner this evening, taking some furious exercise to-morrow, and flirting with somebody in a week! ’

Ruth thought, ‘With Dahlia Whitcombe,’ and she said—

‘I will not mind what you do if you are well and happy.’

‘You are most liberal, and I shall do my best to profit by your generosity; only, do not measure my license to you in the same free spirit.’

‘If you mean to substitute sarcasm for reproach I shall begin to lament that we did not part at Dunthorpe Station.’

‘Or perhaps to wish that we had never met.’

She looked at him and saw that he was smiling fondly; evidently he did not think that, but she answered him seriously.

‘It is possible that it might have been better for us both.’

He squeezed her arm tightly, and would have stopped her mouth with a kiss if some of the passengers had not come aft at that moment.

They were miserable, and yet happy in being together in spite of the ever-present consciousness of the rapidity with which their hour of parting was drawing near.

He had done all he could to prevent her going away; but the arrangements had been completed before he had heard anything about it, and Ruth was not to be moved from her purpose. When it had been suggested to him that her chief reason for going was her anxiety to prevent him from being encumbered with a penniless wife, he had asked her if that were so. She had told him—certainly, that had much to do with her determination. He protested against the idea, and she answered, quietly—

‘Very well; if you are so sure that you will never regret your union with me, you can prove it to me by letting me go for one year.’

‘For two if you like—no, that’s nonsense,’ he cried, checking himself. But he agreed to the test, and he was left little time for reflection or renewed persuasion. He seemed to have scarcely drawn breath between the time when he first heard of her proposed journey, and the day on which he found himself with her on board the *Eucalyptus*.

The Captain came up to them with a friendly warning that Mr. Meredith would soon have to go on board the tug, unless he intended to keep them company as far as Sydney.

‘I have a great mind to do so,’ said Stephen, asking himself why should he not? He was there with all that he cared for most in the world. Why should he not go with her?



She helped him out of that folly : there were duties to others which could not be cast aside.

‘I had almost forgotten—here is a note which Mr. Rapier asked me to give you.’

‘I do not like him,’ she said, ‘and do not know why he should write to me.’

‘It is only to say good-bye, I suppose. I know you are prejudiced against him ; but he is a good fellow and your friend.’

The signal came : the tug was about to cast off. They kissed there on the deck—a sad kiss, and it did not matter who saw. Then in a moment it seemed that he was on board the tug, steaming back landward, and the ship with sails spread was gliding away to sea.

How soon the little steamer became a speck to him !

‘Became a speck to him !

As long as she was

in sight, and she waved the letter he had placed in her hand.

He clenched his teeth and frowned as the vessel melted into the clouds, crying bitterly to himself, 'Why should this parting be? Thank God, it will soon end. A year is a short time in a busy life, and our happiness will be the greater for this trial of our faith.'

Her eyes were dim very soon, and she pressed her feverish brow against the bulwark. Then she heard footsteps near, and with a mechanical effort to hide her emotion she carelessly opened the note that was in her hand. This was what she read:—

'You will see me sooner than you expect. It will be a surprise for you, and a pleasant one, I hope.'

'LEWIS RAPIER.'

This was puzzling, but she was too full of other thoughts to attempt to make out the meaning of the words.

'Miss Clark,' said somebody behind her, and she seemed to know the voice.

She turned slowly, and saw Lewis Rapier smiling at her.

CHAPTER VI.

THE HAND OF DESTINY IN KID GLOVES

THE surprise was so great that she could only stare at him for a few moments without a thought of speech.

A round fur cap, a tight-fitting overcoat with fur collar and facings, the tall, gracefully muscular figure, the handsome face, lit by the bright blue eyes and adorned by the thick, well-trimmed black moustache, and the whole circumstance of the man's unexpected appearance combined to make it impressive, as well as startling.

‘You are astonished and not pleased,’ he said, evidently enjoying her amazement; and yet there was a note of sadness in his voice,

She continued to look at him, but made no reply. There was nothing like fear in her expression; it was simply that of amazement slowly developing into one of curiosity.

‘What are you thinking about?’ he inquired, still smiling.

‘Vanderdecken.’ was the droll response.

‘The Flying Dutchman! Well, he is not a bad prototype for me. If I remember the legend at all correctly, he was a man doomed for his sins to the weird fate of having to make a constant but futile attempt to weather a storm, but permitted at long intervals to visit the earth in search of the one thing that would break the spell which was upon him—that was the love of a true woman. . . . There are many Vanderdeckens in the world, many poor wretches condemned to be perpetually fighting with the storms of life, and few have the good fortune to find the charm which breaks the spell. Shall I be amongst the lucky ones?’

‘ Do you deserve to be ? ’ she asked coldly, the while her fingers were deliberately tearing his note into fragments.

‘ Who can answer such a problem as that for himself ? Of course I think I do. You and others may not agree with me ; and even if I succeeded in obtaining the treasure, you might still deny that I deserved it. There would be very little love in the world if it were to be meted out according to desert.’

She held the fragments of paper on the palm of her hand over the bulwark and the wind swept them away—all except one piece which fell upon the deck. She carefully picked it up and cast it overboard.

He watched her closely as she did this, and although he could divine nothing from her calm and thoughtful face, the action told him a great deal.

‘ You are annoyed that you should have



been waving your adieu to Stephen Meredith with my note in your hand ?

‘I am.’

‘There is a kind of satire in it ; but he will never know anything about it, and so will suffer nothing in consequence of the sign of my coming being the signal of his farewell.’

‘It was unfortunate that he should have been the bearer of it,’ she said, looking in the direction in which the tug had disappeared.

‘I did not mean any petty cruelty to him in asking him to be my messenger ; I wanted you to feel that he and I are friends.’

‘Friends ?’

‘Yes, and good ones, I believe. Are you superstitious ?’

‘I think not.’

‘I am ; and in your own act of using that paper to signal farewell to him I can see my own future.’

‘Most people who see their own future only see what they wish it to be.’

This so quietly that the undercurrent of contempt was scarcely perceptible, even to Lewis Rapier, who was gifted with special sensitiveness to every change of tone. An *Æolian* harp could not answer the modulations of the breeze more quickly than he detected the variations of feeling in others toward him. What he did notice he did not heed.

‘True, and I do not profess to see anything but what I wish. I know that things will happen which will not be agreeable, but whilst it is in our power we need not dwell upon them further than to take such precautions against them as common sense may suggest. When I said that I could see my future I meant my future in relation to you.’

‘To me!’ she exclaimed, turning upon him with open contempt and something like anger. Then, checking herself, she added

coldly : ' There can be no possible relationship between your future and mine.'

There was no passion, no ill-temper on his face or in his voice ; there was rather a suggestion of regret that what he prophesied must be as he said—

' You are my fate, my destiny, or whatever we may call that which we can't help, don't like, and yet must submit to ; and I am yours. Dreadful nonsense this—is it not ? And you would be glad to get away from me ? Well, you shall—for a time ; but meanwhile, suppose we take a turn along the deck, and when you are more reconciled to my presence we can try to understand each other.'

She drew back.

' Mr. Rapier, I am not well, and I am much distressed. You know that I do not like you, and you are aware that your appearance here is as unpleasant as it is surprising. I certainly would not have come by this ship if I

had known that you also were to be a passenger. That is frank enough.'

' You always were frank, and I hope you have found me the same. You wish me to leave you. I shall do so, because I know that by-and-by you will call me to your aid.'

' Ridiculous !'

' May-be—as it seems at present. Come and, as we walk, I shall explain.'

He offered his arm, and she thrust her hands into the pockets of her ulster. But she walked beside him.

The wind was moderate, and the vessel was making its way lazily.

' I am not a passenger,' he proceeded.

' I am glad of that. But——!'

' But how am I to be disposed of?' he said, with a slight laugh, completing her exclamation. ' Easily enough. I came on board desiring to be the last friend who should speak to you on this side of the world, and with a very feeble,

hope that, after we had talked together, your course might be changed. I waited in the mate's cabin, and came out when you were alone. Now, as to getting away—look.'

He pointed to a speck on the water.

'That thing is a yacht: one of the fastest sailers afloat. It is waiting your commands.'

'What nonsense is this, Mr. Rapier?'

'No nonsense at all. It is simply this: I have made very complete arrangements, as you must perceive, to—'

'To annoy me, apparently.'

'No,—to do whatever you please. That yacht will take me back to London alone; or will take us both wherever your fancy pleases to rove.'

She looked at the speck on the water; she looked at him. She put out her hand and touched him on the shoulder; then she looked back again along the track of the vessel. There was no land in sight; only sea and sky.

and that faint line which marked dimly for a little way the course they had steered

‘I am *not* dreaming. It is real—I am on board the *Eucalyptus*; Stephen has gone home, and you are with me. What does it all mean?’

She spoke in the self-questioning way of one waking from a dream so vivid that it cannot be immediately distinguished from reality, and she passed her hand over her eyes to clear her vision.

‘It is not intended to mean anything that should be disagreeable to you.’

‘You can easily prove that!’

‘You mean of course by leaving you. Very well, I am prepared to do even that; but first I want you to listen to me for, say, ten minutes.’

‘I am at your mercy, and I suppose you may speak for twenty minutes if you are so disposed.’

He took out his watch and held it with the face towards her.

‘You can stop me when I pass my time.’

‘Go on.’

‘Very well. Take my arm so that your fellow-passengers may not think we are quarrelling.’

She obeyed without thinking, and instantly became conscious that she had made a mistake in yielding even in this trifling matter to his command; for it was a command, and the reference to the passengers a mere pretext. He acted on the principle of the mesmerist, and obtained submission to his will by the firm assertion of it.

‘I wish you to feel in the first place that I have divined the real meaning of your self-banishment. You are going away in order that Stephen Meredith may marry Dahlia Whitcombe, and so obtain the fortune which Mr.

Dotridge designs for them in that event.
That is correct ?

‘ I cannot see what you have to do with the
motives of my conduct ? ’

‘ I have everything to do with them, for by
showing you that I understand them I expect you
to learn to understand me, and in time—if not
at once—be content with your fate ; that is me.’

She withdrew her arm from his and looked
straight in his face.

‘ In many ways I have had reason to admire
your judgment and discretion. I do not dis-
cover either in your present conduct. Suppos-
ing I could care for you—and you know that is
impossible—why should you desire to marry a
poor woman when you have so many opportu-
nities to secure one who has a fortune ? ’

‘ Because I prefer you, and think you have
a fortune—in yourself. I am aware it is foolish,
and it is the one foolish thing I have done in
the course of my life which cannot be mended.



But, you see, there is no accounting for these eccentricities of nature. My time is getting short, and you will excuse me if I am a little rough in the way I put things. Although you are going away with what is really a kind, generous motive, you are sustained by the hope —by the belief that Meredith will remain true; and that when he learns what Dotridge's arrangement is he will refuse Dahlia and wait for you. That is what you expect. Own it, to yourself if not to me.'

'I have no answer,' she said weariedly, and again she glanced backward.

'I do not require any; but I wish you could get rid of the thought or hope. He will marry Dahlia Whitcombe; he will cherish kindly memories of you—probably he will name one of their children after you—and he will have an easy, comfortable life. You know he could not have that with you, for he is too feeble to withstand the stings of poverty,

knowing that he might have been rich but for you. You know all that and you cannot trust him.'

'Are you nearly done?' she asked with clenched teeth.

'Yes, but I have two minutes yet, and I wish to tell you that Meredith is absolutely ruined, and that, unless by the help of Dahlia Whitcombe, he cannot remain at Derewood Grange for six months longer. He does not himself yet know how complete is his ruin. His mother does, and she is Dahlia's friend. With these circumstances combined the result is inevitable.'

She bowed her head, and he did not see how her lips trembled; he could not hear the cry which passed through her brain. He was surprised by the quietness of her response and the nature of it.

'Thank you, Mr. Rapier; you have done me the greatest kindness that one friend could

do to another in setting these matters clearly before me. I am glad that the parting is over, and now I shall look back without regret since I know the importance of the service I have rendered him. Thank you again.'

'I thought it would do you good to have matters plainly stated; and you see my little surprise has not been altogether unpleasant.'

'I am obliged to you; that is all I can say.'

'I wish you could speak a little less coldly to me. However, I can wait, for I know that your feelings will change towards me when you have learnt to think a little less about him. One thing more; although Dotridge has not done for you what he ought to have done, and what I believe at one time he intended to do—'

'Stop, sir. You must not speak one word about Mr. Dotridge. You know him well—in some respects, better perhaps than I do; but in this instance you do not understand him or

me. He has been kind and generous, and has done everything I could wish or permit. Let that suffice.'

'It is enough. Now for the question which all this leads to. There is the yacht: Do you come with me, or do you remain on board the *Eucalyptus* ? '

'I remain here. Farewell ? '

'No, not farewell in the sense in which you are using the word. This is only a brief goodbye.'

He pressed her hand fervently. She could not speak any more, but hurried down to her cabin.

An hour later, when she returned to the deck, Lewis Rapier was no longer on board the vessel.

CHAPTER VII.

AT DEREWOOD GRANGE.

A PLAIN white house with a roof of red tiles —the red toned down by age into a warm sober hue and varied by patches of lichen. A squat, substantial building which in sunshine or rain, in summer or winter, filled the eye with a sense of ‘home.’ That was Derewood Grange.

In front there was a considerable lawn surrounded by orchard ground ; at the back there were more orchard, a large kitchen garden, forcing-houses, and vineries. The stable, cow-house, barn, pigstyes, and other farm buildings, formed a square at one corner of the kitchen garden, and within two hundred yards of the

house ; for Derewood Grange had been erected at a time when the proprietors were proud of their cattle and their occupation as farmers. The nearness of the duck-pond had no suggestive terror of damp, for the Merediths of past generations believed and the present generation had grown up in the faith that there was no finer specimen of an English country house to be found anywhere. The difficulties of which they all had had some experience only rendered the place more dear to them. There was nothing new-fangled about the appearance of house or grounds outside, although Mrs. Meredith and her daughters had contrived to introduce a few modern improvements to the interior. There was, however, a vast difference in the system of cultivating the land, and the number of new machines Stephen had about the place, either on trial or in permanent use, bewildered the old labourers and made Dick Smalley, who had been born here and begun

service under the grandfather of the present master, a melancholy prophet of certain ruin.

‘Hands don’t count for aught nowadays,’ was his constant growl, ‘and I s’pose afore long there won’t be no work for man or woman to do. I’ve seen as many as fifty folk in the fields at harvest, where now there ain’t more’n ten, or maybe a dozen. What are we going to do if all the work is to be done by them machines?’

Dick shook his head and pottered about, finding that there was plenty for him to do, whatever he might think of the work done by others.

It was night when Stephen reached Dunthorpe Station, and as he had not been certain of the time of his return, he had told Dick that he would walk home—the distance was under three miles. He was, therefore, somewhat surprised to see the Grange dog-cart waiting at the door.

An explanation was immediately provided

by his brother 'Jim'—a sturdy little fellow of sixteen, full of fun and vanity. Everybody called him 'Jim,' and his figure seemed to be made for the name: he called himself—James Austin Meredith, and insisted upon being so described by everyone over whom he had any authority.

'Hallo! you have turned up Steve! Dahlia said you would. She'd a parcel coming from London—new bonnet I suppose—and she got me to drive her over for it. Then as this was the last train, we thought we'd wait a minute and see if you came by it. She said you would; I bet tuppence you wouldn't, and I've lost. Lend us a bob, like a good chap, so that I may pay my debt of honour. Thanks—you can score it up against me. Here she is.'

Dahlia came forward from the parcel office.

'It has not come, and it is so vexing to have brought you all this way for nothing, Jim.'

‘What a whopper!’ was Jim’s mental exclamation as he saw her blushing greeting of Stephen. He said aloud: ‘You’ve won tuppence, that’s something, isn’t it?’

‘And we have met Stephen, which is much more satisfactory,’ she said, laughing.

‘To you, I daresay,’ cried Jim, unsympathetically, as he pocketed his shilling without having paid the ‘tuppence,’ as he had no change. ‘I want my supper, so let us start. I drive, and you two can spoon as much as you like; I won’t hear or see. For another bob, Steve, I’d walk home, and leave you the trap to yourselves.’

He made a malicious pretence of whispering the last sentence, and so gave it greater emphasis.

‘I am in no joking humour, Jim, and you may have to walk home without a bribe if you don’t take care.’

‘Temper!’ said the lad, with a short

whistle, as he took his seat and the reins. He continued to mutter to himself, whilst his brother was assisting Miss Whitcombe, and arranging the rugs. ‘Don’t believe there was any bonnet at all. Only a dodge to catch Steve, and to look as if it was quite by accident. Ready, you people? Then off we go.’

He made the whip play about the horse’s ears, and they passed out of the dim lights of the station into the white, misty atmosphere of a December night.

Dahlia Whitcombe was a handsome girl, of average height, plump and well-developed. She had a fair, round face, soft sympathetic mouth and big eyes, which seemed to be in a perpetual state of surprise. She would have been taken by any painter as a model for wondering innocence. But the one fact upon which she particularly prided herself was that she could say with truth ‘I am not a fool.’

She was one of those creatures who seem

to be always gushing forward to 'a first love.' This is really the first and only one! But she had written and said the same thing a dozen times before. To some extent she believed in the theory herself; all that had previously happened had been mere fancies. This one was the real love: there was no necessity to speak about by-gone odd kisses and embraces and protestations.

'I am glad we met you,' she said to Stephen when they had got comfortably seated; and there was a kindness in her voice for which the man was grateful. 'You must be tired after such a long journey.'

'I have not thought about the journey,' he said softly; 'but I do feel tired and depressed. I think seeing a friend off to Australia is very like attending a funeral.'

Dahlia had many pretty ways: she could shudder very prettily, and she did so now. It was not a marked movement; it was just

enough to show the gentle tremor that was passing over her, and it suggested a deal of feeling.

‘Poor Ruth,’ she sighed, as if speaking to herself rather than to him. ‘I wish she could have been persuaded to remain with us.’

‘I wish so too,’ he ejaculated earnestly.

‘It is strange how determined she was,’ continued Dahlia, looking dreamily into his face, and dim as the light was he could catch the expression of yearning sympathy that was in her eyes. ‘Did she remain quite firm to the last?’

‘Yes; nothing could move her.’

His voice was husky, and he turned his face away from his companion.

‘I never knew anybody who had such a determined way as Ruth, and yet I cannot think of her as what people call a strong-minded woman—she was so gentle in all her ways.’

‘She was indeed. Do you notice how we are talking about her—as if she were dead?’

Dahlia again shuddered very prettily.

‘It is so like that,’ she replied in an undertone. ‘When I said to her—“But you will come back soon,” she only kissed me, and then after a little while whispered to me, “I do not think I shall ever come back, Dahlia,” and although we were standing in the drawing-room, with the fire burning very brightly, I felt as if I had been kneeling by the death bed of somebody I was very fond of. I told her so, and she laughed at me, and told me I was a sentimental, foolish creature. But you feel it is like that, do you not?’

‘At times, I do ; but then I know it is not quite so bad as that. I know that she will come back, and I hope and believe that we shall all have many merry days together in spite of the unpleasant appearance of things at present.’

‘Do you think it will be so?’ she cried eagerly. ‘I am glad you are able to think that, and I hope it may be, with all my heart.’

She put out her dainty little hand, and Stephen took it in his, clasping it gratefully. These were the first words of real sympathy he had heard in regard to Ruth, and they made a deep impression upon him. The first kind hand which touches us in the moments of acutest pain seems always the gentlest. His mother had not concealed the fact that she was glad Ruth was going away, although she had said nothing harsh about her. His eldest sister Harriet—the bright sympathetic ‘Hat,’ as she was called, the friend, confidante, and counsellor of the whole family—was away from home. The other girls were not in his confidence, and although they knew quite well how much he was disturbed by Ruth’s departure, they sufficiently under the control of their m^o to think it wise to offer him no consolation.

So it came about that Dahlia was his first comforter in his sorrow, and he, who had always hitherto regarded her as a somewhat selfish and decidedly frivolous girl, was able to say to his mother when he entered the Grange that night—

‘Dahlia is wonderfully improved. I am glad she met me at the station, though I didn’t like the sight of her at first. She has done me a great deal of good.’

‘I always told you that she was a good girl,’ said the mother calmly, thinking of the heiress and gratified by Stephen’s appreciation of her.

CHAPTER VIII.

WITH THE BEST INTENTIONS !

THERE was not the slightest doubt in Mrs. Meredith's mind that Dahlia was a suitable and even a desirable partner for her son; she had never had the slightest doubt of it from the moment she heard that the lady was to be regarded in every way as the daughter of Humphrey Dotridge, and was to inherit a considerable fortune. He had told her so himself, and had laid much emphasis on his desire that she should become Stephen's wife.

Notwithstanding their relationship, Mrs. Meredith knew very little about her late husband's nephew. His ways had been always,

if not mysterious, at any rate reticent about his private affairs. She knew vaguely that in various gigantic financial speculations he had amassed much wealth ; but what the amount might be she had no idea ; and the vagueness of the rumours regarding it tended to magnify its extent in her eyes. She saw enough and heard enough, however, to be awed by a sense of its vastness, and she had good reasons for wishing that as much as possible of it might find its way to Derewood Grange. Restricted means and five girls to provide for are conditions which would set any judicious mother thinking about her rich relations.

But in addition to the fact that she was an heiress, Mrs. Meredith was moved by the conviction that Dahlia was fond of her son, and the girls were all fond of her. She had been displeased when she became aware of Stephen's infatuation for Ruth Clark—a 'penniless dependent,' as she called her—but was careful not to irri-

tate him by saying too much on the subject. She was now in high glee at the course events had taken, and was confident that her wishes and Mr. Dotridge's would be fulfilled.

And here was the proof of it ; on the very first night after Ruth had been definitely disposed of, Stephen had uttered the first kind words which had passed his lips about Dahlia for some time.

Mrs. Meredith was not exactly a schemer, but she would do a good deal to serve her own purposes, especially when convinced that in serving them she was really advancing the interests of others. She was a little, stout, bright-eyed woman of active brain and habits, always doing something for somebody's good ; and even when she did make mistakes, as would sometimes happen, she could console herself with that most agreeable of all reflections, that she had done everything with the best intentions.

So when Dahlia came to say good-night—

‘ You are looking very well, child,’ she said, smiling cheerfully; ‘ and I have something to tell you—Stephen was very pleased that you met him at the station to-night.’

‘ Oh ! ’ and the exclamation of pleasure was expressed in the eyes as well as by the mouth.

‘ I told you he would be, and, you little goose, you very nearly missed the opportunity of pleasing him ! —if I had not remembered about that bonnet coming from town ! ’

At this reference to the bonnet, a comical smile overspread the faces of both—an innocent kind of smile, although—if the comparison were not somewhat coarse when applied to two ladies who really meant no harm—it might be described as the kind of smile which two confederates engaged in the confidence trick interchange when they see their dupe is successfully hoaxed.

‘I am very glad I went—he was very nice and kind, but I wish it could have been done without the bonnet. Jim said it was all a pretence, and if he should find it out! You know how angry he gets about anything of that sort.’

‘But, my dear, you *are* going to get a bonnet, and Stephen shall drive you to the station himself, so that he may see you receive it, if you like. You need not trouble yourself all the same; Stephen will not give the matter a thought. Jim is only a boy, and likes to say things which tantalize you girls.’

Dahlia smoothed her plump soft hands one upon the other, and looked thoughtfully into the fire. Her thoughts were pleasant ones, for the happy light was still upon her face. Then very deliberately she said—

‘I think it would have been better to have told him frankly that I went to the station because I hoped to meet him, and because

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At this reference to the bonnet, a comical smile overspread the faces of both—an innocent kind of smile, although—if the comparison were not somewhat coarse when applied to two ladies who really meant no harm—it might be described as the kind of smile which two confederates engaged in the confidence trick interchange when they see their dupe is successfully hoaxed.

‘I am very glad I went—he was very nice and kind, but I wish it could have been done without the bonnet. Jim said it was all a pretence, and if he should find it out! You know how angry he gets about anything of that sort.’

‘But, my dear, you *are* going to get a bonnet, and Stephen shall drive you to the station himself, so that he may see you receive it, if you like. You need not trouble yourself all the same; Stephen will not give the matter a thought. Jim is only a boy, and likes to say things which tantalize you girls.’

Dahlia smoothed her plump soft hands one upon the other, and looked thoughtfully into the fire. Her thoughts were pleasant ones, for the happy light was still upon her face. Then very deliberately she said—

‘I think it would have been better to have told him frankly that I went to the station because I hoped to meet him, and because



I hoped to see how he looked after the parting.'

She said this not as one who was regretting having performed cleverly a piece of petty deception—she was, indeed, a little proud of her skill in this respect—but as one who begins to think that the plain simple truth might have been more profitable.

'I have no doubt he would have said "Thank you, you are very kind," and not spoken another word to you all the way home.'

'Do you think he would have done that?' she asked, still thinking, and a shade of seriousness coming over her pretty face now.

'I am sure of it.'

'Then you believe he cared for her a great deal, and he can never care for me in the same way? . . . I am sorry for that. I wanted to think that he could care for nobody in the

world like me. I wish he had gone with her—it is cruel to be obliged to marry him or become a beggar. I don't think I can do it unless he pretends to care for me. . . . I might be content with even that, but he won't do it. I wish I was dead.'

She covered her face with one hand to hide the tears which sprang to her eyes—tears of vexation and wounded vanity.

In her manner there was a curious mingling of childish anxiety to possess a coveted toy which at present belonged to another, of woman's jealousy, and of affection for the man ; whilst there was a strong undercurrent of irritation at the thought of the consequences to herself if she failed to win him. She was clever enough to know that, although she was very showy in her appearance and accomplishments, she was not very useful, and would find the world hard indeed to deal with if she should ever be compelled to attempt to earn her own



CHAPTER IX.

HIS HOPE.

BUT Mrs. Meredith did not understand what substantial food hope is for lovers. They can exist upon it alone for periods ranging from five minutes to five years. The length of the period is regulated by the graduation of the degrees of imaginary and real liking of which the love is compounded. Only true love attains the longer period, and then other considerations must be taken into account; chief amongst these is the one that the hope nourishment must be used by both sides. When that is the case, then the more opposition is brought to bear against the love the more sustaining does the food prove.

Stephen was well supplied with the nourishing food called hope ; he had such a stock that he could stand a siege of twelve years instead of twelve months. But there was just that one small mouse in the granary—she had said she would come back if he proved true ! That implied a doubt of him, and so he knew in a vague way that she could not be sustained by the boundless hope which kept him up.

If he proved true !

What a foolish suggestion for her to make —what an unworthy doubt—this came with a touch of pain—what a cruel thing for her to say !

But she had been much troubled in her mind during the last few months, poor girl ! She loved him, he was sure of that. She had said she would come back, and Ruth never broke a promise.

That was enough for him—it ought to be enough, and he had his part to do in order to

make her glad to come. He had to buckle to his work manfully, and clear his feet of all the difficulties which hampered them. That could be done ; no man who is really willing to work can be overcome by fortune. He boldly accepts her worst buffets and then cries—

‘ You have done your worst for that bout.
Now I am ready to begin again.’

And he begins again and conquers.

That was Stephen’s theory of life. He had need of the hardihood which such a theory implies, for when he went into his affairs and the legacy of debt which had been left him, he found things more involved than he, in his worst fits of depression, had thought they were. In some of these fits, indeed, the faith in his own theory was severely tested ; for it seemed to require a greater power of endurance than he possessed to keep matters straight at Derewood Grange.

At such times he was grateful for the

soothing presence of Dahlia. She did not in any way obtrude her sympathy upon him ; but, somehow, she seemed to be always suggesting the cheery words—

‘Courage ! You will overcome all these worries. You will do it for Ruth’s sake.’

That was really helpful to the man ; and he found himself taking more interest in the future of this girl than at one time he thought possible. The fact was that his sense of relief in finding that she was aware of his feelings for Ruth, and appreciated them, gave him much delight. His mother and sisters might speculate as much as they pleased about uniting him to Dahlia against his will, as long as Dahlia herself had no idea of that kind and was his true friend and Ruth’s.

So much he expressed to Mr. Bassnett when he saw him about his affairs in accordance with the last instructions of his cousin. Mr. Bassnett, of course, had made a formal appoint-

ment in a note signed in the name of the firm, because in all business transactions Mr. Bassnett was most particular to observe the strictest formality even with his private friends—it saved so many misunderstandings, and at once removed any impression a client might have that friendly feelings could affect his judgment of the case in hand.

He could not prevent a friend from referring to matters which were not directly connected with business, but he seldom pronounced an opinion on such subjects: and yet he always left the impression of having given you the best possible advice which a man of experience and your friend could offer under the circumstances.

In the present instance he examined Stephen's face carefully, and there was a peculiar smile on his own as he did so.

‘Yes; I always thought Miss Whitcombe a bright, clever sort of girl,’ he said as he

watched Stephen ; ' and if all goes well she will have a comfortable little fortune to bring to the man who marries her. At present I think all will go well.'

There was a significance in the intonation of the last sentence which Stephen did not observe.

' I sincerely hope it will,' was his earnest observation. ' I think she deserves that all should go well with her.'

' I am sure it will if you like to help her,' said the lawyer laughingly. .

' And I am sure that I shall be ready to do anything in my power to help her,' was Stephen's innocent response. ' From the way you speak, Bassnett, it seems as if you knew some way in which I could help her. Should that be the case, tell me, for there cannot be any one more willing to do it.'

' Oh, I have no doubt you will find out the way when the occasion arises. Meanwhile, we must go to your own business.'

‘I beg your pardon, Bassnett ; I ought to know your ways by this time, and here have I been chattering about things which we ought to have discussed at home. Well, the affairs are bad : Dotridge said he had made arrangements to tide me over the present mess, and you would explain, as he is forbidden to enter into details himself.’

‘Well, luckily, there is at this moment nothing very harassing for you to hear or me explain. Your last speculations involved a clear loss of three thousand. That is not a big sum to look at in figures, but it is not easy to find when you want it. I have known men of much more considerable property than you possess—men of ancient title and family, who have had to go through the court for a sum like that. Of course, it only represents the last straw.’

‘And the last straw would break me, but for Dotridge.’

‘Exactly ; his instructions are that all your present engagements are to be met, and that for one year you are to be allowed to act as freely as if Derewood did not owe any man a penny.’

‘Ah, he knows that one year will suffice to set me on my feet.’

‘I did not ask him what he knew,’ said the lawyer, complacently, ‘or why he acted as he is doing. He is a strange man, placed in a very peculiar position, and I must say between ourselves that he is acting very well for all parties. But he means to be a little hard on you.’

‘In what way ?’

‘At the end of the year he says you must be prepared to meet your engagements yourself. Of course, if he is alive that will not be of much consequence, but you know his condition and——’

‘Why, in this Dotridge gives me the strongest proof of friendship,’ cried Stephen warmly. ‘He knows what a bitter pill it is for

me to swallow the necessity to make these arrangements, and he understands that at the end of the year I should sell up everything rather than have to renew them—or seek the renewal of them—I ought to say. Dotridge is a strange fellow, but he never showed kindlier feeling to me than in making that condition.'

Mr. Bassnett pulled the end of his long, thin moustache, and for once in his life was really embarrassed.

'I am glad you think so. I feel convinced that he means to act in the most kindly spirit towards you, and that in the final arrangements he has made he has almost thrust a fortune upon you.'

'What is it you mean?' exclaimed Stephen in much amazement.

'Now, there you put me in an awkward position.'

'Then do not answer.'

‘Exactly ; I was not going to answer ; but at the same time it is awkward when one thinks that a simple reply would be useful, to be obliged to say you cannot give it. Of all the things I dislike, it is to have to deal with two people who really mean to be kindly to each other, and who are yet playing a game at hide and seek.’

‘I do not understand.’

‘There is no need you should. I forgot for a moment that we were in Sergeant’s Inn. Give me a breath—there, that will do, and here we are again. Now, attention.’

Stephen was amused as well as interested by the momentary confusion of a man he had never seen in the slightest state of mental bewilderment before.

‘Go ahead, Bassnett, and please do not be afraid of offending me.’

‘There is no probability of that, I hope,’ said the lawyer, now laughing at himself;

‘there is nothing for me to do but to tell you plainly—there are some conditions in Mr. Dotridge’s settlements which I am not at liberty to explain to you; but as they are known to another person, and suspected by others, I have no doubt you will discover them before the time arrives when I am permitted to state them to you.’

‘I have no wish to pry into my cousin’s arrangements, and so I can only inquire when you will be at liberty to reveal the nature of the reserved conditions.’

‘On the death of Mr. Dotridge, or on the return of Miss Clark to England, and the announcement that the date of your marriage with her is fixed.’

‘I can understand the first part of the condition under which my cousin’s wishes are to be revealed to me in their full extent,’ said Stephen thoughtfully; ‘but what on earth my marriage with Miss Clark can have to do with any inten-

tions he has in regard to our family is beyond my comprehension.'

'And on that subject my mouth is closed whether you speak to me as client or friend. Truth to tell, I do not understand it quite myself; but I do in part and suspect the rest. To you my suspicion would appear simply suggestive that I was showing marked symptoms of softening of the brain. To a man of law like myself, accustomed to all sorts of mental and moral vagaries on the part of clients, my suspicion would appear feasible and reasonable enough to make him act cautiously in saying or doing anything which might prejudice the interests of his client or his friend. Dottridge stands in both positions towards me and so do you. May I offer you advice apart from business?'

'To be sure you may, and I shall thank you for it.'

'On the whole I believe you would thank

me more if you understood matters as well as I do. However, this is the counsel I offer; go on as you would do if you had no expectations for yourself or your family from any rich relations. That is all.'

'I mean to do so, and thank you as I said I would for the counsel. I know you mean more than you can say. I have the more reason to be grateful that you have gone so far out of your usual course as to confirm me in my own decision as to what I am to do and ought to do.'

'Spoken like a true man, and I do believe you will have a good time of it yet whichever way things go. In any case I shall always be ready to act for you in any matter of business, and still more ready to do what it is permitted me to do as your friend.'

'I believe you, Bassnett, although—'

He paused. Bassnett, smiling, finished the sentence for him—

‘Although I am a lawyer is what you would have said.’

‘No; you are wrong, for once: although you are Dotridge’s and Rapier’s friend, is what I would have said.’

‘They are both clever men, and Rapier is first-rate company. I do not see why my friendliness with them should interfere with any regard I may have for you.’

‘Forget that speech—it was the result of some passing sense of spleen, carelessly spoken. I could not give myself a reason for it. On the other hand, I have every reason to be grateful to my cousin, and I have no reason to think ill of Rapier.’

‘Ah, if we could all forget the careless words we speak what a happy world it would be! But it is not difficult to forget what does not concern ourselves, so you have my promise not to remember your slip.’

‘One question more, and I shall be off. Will



Dottridge be able to see any of us again before he leaves Kemerton ? '

' As soon as the doctors have decided when he may move, you shall be informed. Cannes or Nice will be the place he goes to, but nothing on that head is definitely fixed yet. The one thing that is fixed, is his desire that you should all cease to think of him as a living person. You know that this is not entirely the result of eccentricity, although none of us can know all the motives which actuate him.'

' This living death seems to me more unfortunate for himself than for others. However, if we cannot forget our own careless words, there is one thing we can forget—our friends.'

' But not our enemies, you might have added.'

' We can forget them, too, I suppose, sometimes ; but we do sometimes recollect a wrong more keenly than a benefit. This is a nice way to waste your time, Bassnett,' Stephen

went on, his face brightening as he roused himself from the abstracted manner in which he had been speaking during the last few moments. 'I have only half an hour to catch up an unprotected female who has been placed under my care for the journey to town and back.'

'Miss Whitcombe, I presume.'

'Yes; she had something to do in town, and my mother said as I was coming she could dispense with her escort.'

'I daresay the lady thought so too. Mrs. Meredith is a very sensible woman. Give her my regards. I shall see you all next week.'

When Stephen went away, Mr. Bassnett leaned back in his chair, smiling thoughtfully and paring his nails.

'Dotridge will have his wish,' was his reflection. 'Meredith will marry Dahlia Whitcombe.'

CHAPTER X.

HER DESPAIR.

THE election of Stephen as Dahlia's special escort had been arranged simply enough. Mrs. Meredith and her ward had some millinery and dressmaking business of importance to transact in town, and as Stephen happened to be going to London about the time, his mother fixed that they should all go together. On the morning of the appointed day Mrs. Meredith found that she could not go without much inconvenience, but there was no reason why Dahlia should postpone the journey, as Stephen could take care of her.

It would not enter into the head of any



ordinary being that there could be any objection to such an arrangement as that, and it certainly did not enter into Stephen's. Nothing could be simpler: they would travel together, and, whilst he was at Sergeant's Inn, she could attend to her dressmaking business, and then they could return together. That would be so nice!—always provided, as Dahlia suggested, that Stephen had no other engagement besides that with Mr. Bassnett. He had none, and so it came about that they travelled alone together.

There had been a white mist over the marshy parts of Essex as they came along in the morning. There was a fog in London, but it was not so bad in the early part of the day as to impede traffic to any considerable extent. By the time Stephen went to find his companion at the dressmaker's in Lamb's Conduit Street, the fog had become so dense that cabs and all other vehicles moved slowly and with difficulty.

‘I was half afraid you would never find me in this darkness,’ she said, laughing, ‘and was almost sorry I had not arranged to go for you.’

‘Why, what difference could that have made? Can you find your way through a London fog better than I under the guardianship of an experienced cabby?’

She was a little confused; then, with brightening face—

‘It might have saved time, you know, as we should have been so much nearer the station.’

‘Of course. I did not think of that. But we’ll manage to get along somehow.’

‘I hope we may,’ she replied, with unnecessary glee, as she took her seat in the cab.

The horse could only move at a walking pace, and long before they reached Liverpool Street, Stephen began to fear that they would be too late for the last train. But they were

in time enough—the train before the last had not yet started. After much trouble, they found the right platform and the right train, under the guidance of a good-natured porter, who took them for a young couple likely to prefer their own company, and accordingly secured an empty compartment for them.

Then they tried to draw breath ; but that was almost impossible in the thick atmosphere. Then they tried to look at each other, and they found it almost impossible to see one another's faces without drawing very close together; and that might have resulted in something like explosions of small fog signals, but for the brotherly relationship which existed between the two.

He muffled her up very carefully, and insisted upon her keeping her mouth well covered with a soft woollen shawl.

He was rather annoyed by the delay and the discomfort of their position.

She enjoyed it all intensely as if it were a huge joke which somebody had played upon them ; and his little attentions and anxieties on her account made her almost exclaim aloud, ‘I wish there was a fog every day and we were travelling in it !’ But she modified the expression to—

‘ I rather enjoy the fun of all this—only I hope you will not get cross, Stephen.’

‘ I am afraid I am cross already. There is no saying when we shall get away from here or when we may reach Dunthorpe, and I am hungry ! ’

‘ Oh, dear ! that is dreadful. So am I ! ’

‘ That makes it all the worse, for I should be afraid to adventure into that Egyptian darkness, lest I should never find you again.’

‘ And would you be sorry ? ’

‘ Well, I should not like to have it said that I had lost you in a fog—it would be so absurd. However, I shall try.’

‘No, no, don’t leave me—get one of the porters to bring us something.’

‘But the difficulty is to *see* a porter.’

‘Shout !’

‘Happy thought—woman’s wit for ever.’

Stephen shouted, and about the tenth repetition brought their good-natured friend to the window. He procured sandwiches and coffee for them.

Dahlia was in ecstasies.

‘This is real fun—I am so glad I came out to-day !—a pic-nic in a fog is a splendid idea.’

‘It will not be such good fun if we have to remain here all night. How long will it be before we start ?’

‘Don’t know, sir.’

‘Has there been an accident on the line ?’

‘Yes, sir ; goods train broke down and the line is being cleared.’

‘Can’t you find out how long we shall have to wait ?’

There was no answer.

Whilst speaking Stephen had given the cups and saucers and a tip to the man, and he had disappeared. No doubt the rigorous silence imposed upon railway servants as to causes of delay and their probable duration, made him glad to escape the necessity of inventing further evasive answers.

As usual this irritating reserve increased the impatience of the passengers, elicited loud exclamations of indignation all along the train, and the confusion of voices sounding through the darkness might have suggested that this was the actual scene of the accident.

At last the train started, after much clatter of feet along the platform, with brief flashes of something which the passengers understood to be lanterns of the guards and porters. But dark as it had been inside the station, as soon as the train had crawled out of it, the feeble lamps in the carriages seemed to be almost

extinguished. A single glowworm on a dark marsh would have given as much light.

Crawl—whistle—stop—much puffing and groaning of the engine and another crawl for what seemed to those anxious to get home only a few yards at a time:—that represented the progress of the train; and it stopped so much more frequently between stations than at them that people were utterly at a loss to know where they were, and on that head, too, they had difficulty in obtaining information.

Stephen had fastened the rugs round Dahlia's knees and his own, for they had not provided themselves with wraps enough to enable them to be independent of each other on such a night as this, and she complained of feeling very cold. They were obliged to sit close together.

‘I suppose you are wishing that you had not gone up to town to-day?’ said Stephen after a long silence.

‘Not at all; I am enjoying it; but I have

felt a little frightened once or twice. I was thinking of that accident the other day, where the two trains smashed into each other in the tunnel, and the people were crushed together, and——oh! it was dreadful, and we seem to be in a tunnel all the way.'

She crept closer to him, shivering with cold and fear.

'This does not seem very like enjoyment,' he replied, putting his arm round her to draw a shawl more tightly across her shoulders.

Then, as she continued to shiver, he held the shawl in its place.

'No; but that shivering is only the cold and the fog having their effect upon me.'

'They are certainly most depressing influences, and I wish we were safe at Dunthorpe with a cheery fire before us.'

'You are feeling it worse than I do; you have not spoken a word for half an hour until now.'

‘I am not the blithest companion you might have had and ought to have had, Dahlia ; but that cannot be helped.’

‘Who said that anybody wanted to help it ?’ she cried, with an air of coquettishness in spite of the fog and cold.

‘Not you—you are too good-natured to complain. But I cannot help feeling how much more bearable the journey might have been made by anyone who was in a better mood than myself.’

‘But I know that you have many things to disturb your mind just now, and indeed I do feel your taking so much trouble with me as the greatest proof of your kindness. I know that you are sad, but you have not been ungracious to me in consequence.’

‘I should be sorry if I had been so ; you may be sure that I would like to do everything in my power to make you happy.’

‘Thank you, Stephen,’ she said, in a low

voice, and eyes beaming with pleasure as she touched his hand in token of her gratitude, because he could not see how it was expressed on her face.

‘I am glad you are content,’ he proceeded, laughing amusedly, ‘for during the last half hour or so I have been conscious of passing through a particularly bad fit of the blues ; and when wakened from it was afraid that, instead of helping you to bear up, or bear through, this disagreeable journey, I had been making you miserable as well as myself.’

‘I did not think so. But’ (this with sympathetic hesitation) ‘can you not talk to me about your vexations ? Talking even to people who can’t quite understand you often affords relief.’

‘There is nothing particular to talk about,’ he rejoined somewhat weariedly, but evidently pleased by her sympathy. ‘My conversation with Bassnett to-day was satisfactory so far, but

it revealed a deplorable state of affairs. Even at the last my father did not tell me everything about our position. I suppose he did not like to let me know the worst, and no doubt he hoped to live long enough to make things better before they came into my hands.'

'But you will set everything right, Stephen ; you are young and strong, and—so clever !'

'Well, I'm not old, and have a good deal of strength, but as to the cleverness I'm not quite so sure. However, I mean to make a big try for for the sake of others as well as myself.'

There was a long pause, and he could feel the girl shivering still beside him ; and then through the darkness came the low voice—decidedly a sweet voice, and there was something plaintive in the tone—

'You mean for Ruth's sake.'

'Yes, for hers most of all.' I have been thinking of her a good deal in this horrible night, thinking of her out at sea, in fog, in storm—

may be shipwrecked, who knows?—and feeling some bitterness that she should have been able to go away, and feeling at the same time how glad I would have been to have been with her in the fiercest storm that ever blew.'

There was another long pause—a pause which made both conscious that somehow a note of discord had been struck between them.

Presently he felt her head resting on his breast, and he knew that she was crying.

'Why, what is the matter, Dahlia?' he exclaimed in alarm.

There was no answer; but now she was quivering in the effort to suppress convulsive sobs.

The train was groping its way slowly along through the darkness of the fog.

'In heaven's name, what is it? Tell me—can I help you?'

With a short cry she flung herself from him. Her emotion had passed beyond her control, and she knelt with her face buried in the

cushions of the opposite seat, trying to smother her sobs of despair.

He was for a few moments so bewildered that he did not know exactly what to do. Then he stooped to lift her up. At first she seemed to shrink from his touch, but, yielding, he with his arm round her waist raised her, and again her head rested on his shoulder. She did not speak, and he did not disturb her by immediately repeating his wondering inquiry, but endeavoured to soothe her by gently clasping her hand whilst he looked down gravely at her.

And the train slowly groped its way through the darkness.

At length she disengaged herself and said petulantly, as she wiped the tears from her cheeks—

‘ I am sorry to have made such a fool of myself . . . Yes, I wish I had not come to-day . . . No, I don’t. I’m glad I came, for

it shows me that it is hopeless to—to Please, Stephen, forgive this nonsense. I don't think I am well, and what you were saying made me think of something that put me out, and so—and so I have behaved in this silly way. Do please forgive me.'

There were such curious variations of manner and tone in these exclamations—petulance, anger with him and with herself, graduating into shame for having allowed her emotions to get so much the better of her—that Stephen was utterly perplexed. His mother had been a little puzzled by a somewhat similar outburst, but he was helplessly so.

'I wish you would sit down, Dahlia,' he said, kindly, 'and try to explain it all to me. You yourself said a little while ago that talking often gave relief, and surely you can talk to me.'

'I don't know that I can,' she began fiercely, and, instantly checking herself, went on

in a subdued, agitated voice: 'If I were to speak, Stephen, I should vex you, and I don't want to do that more than I have done already.'

'How should it vex me? I shall be sorry, no doubt, to learn that there is something troubling you which I cannot help to relieve, but not vexed.'

'You will be—for what you have been saying has made me angry with Ruth.'

She uttered the last three words defiantly, like a child who says something very bold, and is prepared for a scolding.

'Angry with her—why?' he queried in simple astonishment.

She was surprised by his calmness, and spoke next with more gentleness and a kind of timid hesitation, as if fearful of the pain she was about to give.

'Because—because she has gone away from you.'

There she did hit him very hard indeed ; but he answered quietly—

‘ She had some good reasons for going ; and in any case we could not be married at once.’

‘ There could be no reason to justify her for leaving you at such a time as this,’ she cried, passionately. ‘ There can be no reasons to separate two people who are really in love unless there is doubt in one of them. You know it—you are forced to own it to yourself —she ought to have been here with you now, helping you to fight through these botherations, instead of deserting you at the time when you most needed her help. There !—I have said it and you *are* vexed with me, and I am miserable, and wish my tongue had been cut out before I did say it ! ’

Then she sobbed hysterically, and wanted to draw away from him. He held her in his arms, and patted her on the head, as a father might

have done with a child who was in a fit of passion.

‘There, there, you have got excited, Dahlia ; but I know that all you have said has been out of kindness for me. Our sister Hat might have said the same had she known as much of my feelings for Ruth as you do. We won’t talk any more about this, and I shall forget that you are angry with her, as you will yourself as soon as you are better.’

So with kindly words he soothed her, and all symptoms of hysteria gradually disappeared.

And the train groped its way slowly through the darkness, and at last into Dunthorpe Station.



CHAPTER XI.

AGAIN ON BOARD THE 'EUCALYPTUS.'

'My poor Stephen, you do not know yourself, I think, and I am sure you do not know me, Ruth Clark.

'This is only our third day out at sea, and I am writing more for the satisfaction of my own mind than with any expectation that you will ever see this note-book. Therefore you may be sure that I shall speak with as much honesty as one is capable of showing even to one's self the moment a pen is taken in hand. As soon as one begins to set down thoughts in writing, in spite of every effort to the contrary, there is a consciousness of dressing for company.

I believe that I am speaking my mind with absolute truth, but I am aware of this effect of penmanship, and will do my best to avoid its influence.

‘First, then, let me tell you the reasons for my leaving England.

‘My chief reason for doing so was because I knew that by this act I could confer a fortune on you. I also knew that you would not accept that reason, and therefore refused to tell you until the time had elapsed when you would either possess the fortune or have proved that I had made a mistake. Then, in the latter event, it was and is my intention to return and try to make you happy.

‘The fortune is Dahlia Whitcombe.

‘The way in which that comes about is simple. It is one of Mr. Dotridge’s strange clauses in his strange settlements. I was permitted to know the contents of most of them, but not of all. This clause was one of those I

was permitted to know, for a reason which you will learn presently.

‘ He gives to Dahlia twenty thousand pounds on condition that she becomes your wife within one year from the date of my sailing from England. Unless you marry her you receive nothing from him ; and what provision he may have made for her if you should not do so was one of the things I was not permitted to know.

‘ She is aware of the arrangement ; but she, like the few others who know it, is strictly forbidden to make you acquainted with it.

‘ You are only to know that she is an heiress, and free to make her choice amongst the suitors who may offer. Every exertion is to be made to prevent you from having any suspicion that her fortune is dependent upon winning you from me within a year.

‘ He believes, and I think, she will succeed.

‘ I did object to the test because I knew you

so well. I know you to be kind, affectionate, and good to all who show you kindness. I know she will do that, and you may be won by her sympathy. You will have a beautiful, sympathetic woman beside you. You will think of me as the woman who went away from you because you were in difficulties, and who told you that you could do better without than with her. Of course you did not understand the full meaning of her words, and, therefore, would accept them literally. In doing so you would think that she considered your position as it affected herself. She was thinking of you apart from herself. The bitter struggle she went through before she made this sacrifice—for it was a great sacrifice to her—you will never know.

‘You will only remember me as the one who refused to give you a full explanation of my conduct; as one who is silent to you, who has gone to the other side of the world for no

ostensible reason that could justify her desertion of you when you pressed her so hard to stay ; and the tender woman by your side will replace me (for though it is great heresy, I believe love does change if circumstances seem to give it warrant).

‘ During the later weeks of my stay at home, especially during that night on the pier at Southend and the night following at Kemerton, you gave me a deeper impression of the strength of your character than you had ever done before.

‘ I believed it possible that Dahlia would fail, and I dared not speak.

‘ “ Why was that ? ” you will ask, when you cried to me again and again to tell all, to explain all. The answer is :—

‘ “ Because of my relationship to Mr. Dotridge ! ”

‘ What that relationship is I shall now set down as plainly as I can.

‘ You know that my father, although only a captain in the navy, had saved a little money. He had been a friend almost from boyhood of Mr. Dotridge, who induced him to adventure all he possessed in some speculation. He lost it all; and he died a few months after becoming aware of his ruin.

‘ Mr. Dotridge at once pledged himself to take care of me, and to provide for my future. His first act was to take me into his house, and all the care and all the attendance which were given to Dahlia during her brief residences at Kemerton in her school vacations were given to me.

‘ Mr. Dotridge became ill. I helped to nurse him; he liked me best of all the nurses. He soon found that I made an excellent assistant in his correspondence; and he sometimes even consulted me in business matters.

‘ At length he declared that I must be his confidential secretary; and gradually he trusted

me more and more, not only in regard to the following out of his instructions correctly, but in my judgment as to the particular direction of some affairs. I became in short his friend and confidante.

‘ I was glad to be useful to him, for I liked him much. He had taken the place of my father, and showed me all the kindness—I ought to say even the tenderness—which I remembered to have received from him.

‘ He was early made aware of your attachment to me, and he discovered mine to you.

At first he entirely approved of our attachment, and once or twice spoke of helping us on in the world. Gradually there appeared a change in this approval, although his kindness to me increased rather than diminished.

‘ About this time his health began to fail more and more, the blindness came upon him, and he was confined entirely to his room. He

found himself more and more dependent upon my assistance.

‘One day, whilst reading to him, he suddenly called to me in a voice which, at the moment, seemed strange to me—

‘“Stop, Ruth, I want to speak to you upon some business of more importance than usual. That is to say, of more importance to me than any you have yet had to do with.”

‘“Yes,” I said, wondering what it could be, for I had thought myself so entirely in his confidence that there seemed to be nothing for him to tell me.

‘After a few minutes’ silence he began :

‘“Dahlia is now twenty, and I wish to settle her in life. Stephen Meredith is very hard up, and I wish to help him for his own sake and his father’s. Can you suggest any means by which the two things can be combined ? ”

‘ I was somewhat agitated, and could not understand why. My reply was made as deliberately as I could make it : “ I think you can have no difficulty in making some settlement upon Dahlia, which will enable her to face the world as an independent woman. As regards Stephen Meredith, I can say nothing, for you know my——”

‘ He interrupted me.

‘ “ Your love for him you would say, but of course you will not. On that head you will only say that I know your particular interest in him. I do. But I have noted Stephen’s conduct for some little time past ; and I think that I know of some one who has more interest in you than he can possibly have.”

‘ I was so much puzzled by this statement that I remained silent. He had spoken in such a tone that I could not doubt he meant by “ some one,” himself. But what it could have to do with you I could not understand. I laid

down the book I had been reading, and waited.

“ You make no answer. Well, then, I must speak more plainly. Ruth, come here.”

‘ I went to him behind the screen, and he took my hand.

‘ Still, I did not speak, for a very wild idea was dawning upon me. He went on—

“ You believe that he loves you. So do I. But his is a love that may change; he is young, and although an admirable, good-hearted, honest fellow, another woman than you might attract his attention if you were only absent for a time.”

“ I do not believe it,” I said warmly, and I took my hand away from him angrily.

‘ He did not resent my anger in the slightest degree. He spoke quite quietly.

“ I did not think you would believe it—at first. But when you come to think of it calmly you may believe it possible.”

“ ‘ Impossible,’ I said, still warmly (and please do not think that in telling you all this I am trying to magnify my own faith).

‘ ‘ Just so, but take time, for what I have got to tell you is of much importance to Stephen. I suppose you will tell me that your —love, we must call it—for him cannot change. But suppose also I were to tell you that Stephen—who you know is in difficulties out of which I cannot see his way, unless he has help from some quarter—could obtain a fortune at once if you were not in his way, would you tell me that your liking for him was of such a kind as to permit you to stand in his way?’ ’

‘ ‘ I do not understand.’ ’

‘ ‘ You are a sensible woman ; you have proved yourself so again and again. You know that worldly affairs have a great deal to do with worldly happiness. Love is an admirable adjunct to life, but is not its food. You can understand that to a young man love is

more a passion than a faith. Passions are brief-lived, and are got over again and again by both men and women. Stephen is a young man, and if you were not here he would give his love to another. I do not say this in any disparagement of him ; I am only speaking from my experience of human nature. You do not understand me yet."

“No.” But I fear that in saying this I was not telling the whole truth, for I did begin to comprehend.

“Then I must be more explicit. In the settlements which are about to be prepared I have given twenty thousand to Dahlia if Stephen marries her, and I give nothing to him if he does not. I do not wish to disguise my selfish motives in thus trying to force the two together, but I do not think there is anything wrong in them. She is pretty and smart, and will make exactly the sort of mistress for Derewood Grange who will please him. But

she is selfish, and therefore I mean to leave the money so that she does not get it unless she gets him. A wicked thing to do, is it not? I do not think it is, for it is bringing two people together who, I believe, will suit each other, and providing them with the means of living fairly well. By the same deed I relieve Stephen of all the mortgages on his place. Now, why do you think I do that, and do it in that way?"

"I do not know," I said, coldly, as he told me, but I was trembling and scarcely conscious of how I spoke or what I said, "unless it is because you wish to separate me from him."

"That is precisely what I wish to do. And why I wish to do it is because—now do not be startled, Ruth, or get into a passion—I am speaking and acting after long deliberation: the reason why I do it is because I want you for myself."

‘I did not start, or turn pale, or shrink from him. I stood quite cold, my head acting with the bewilderment of the proposition now made to me. I could not speak.

‘I know you will blame me, Stephen, and think me cruel; but you will not think so long if you remember the nature of the problem set to me. I was to give up you and leave you a fortune, or keep you at the cost of the fortune.

“Well, what do you think of the proposal?” he inquired, after a little time.

“I think it is very cruel to us all,” I answered.

“It is not so in my estimation, for it is kindly meant.”

“It may be and yet be cruel.”

“Do not answer me just now positively. Wait for a week or a month if you like—but not longer than that—and then answer me.”

‘I waited for a month, and the agony of it

I shall never forget. Then I told him that even for your sake I could not accept his hand, grateful as I was to him, or that of any man except yours ; but I would consent to break off my engagement with you for your sake. When I did so I would leave the country, and as I had an uncle in Australia, I would go there and find some work to occupy me, which would enable me to overcome the pain—nothing can ever make me forget it—of the loss of happiness which I sustained for your gain.

“ Go then,” he said, “ and within a year from the date of your leaving England Stephen will be married to Dahlia.”

‘ He spoke bitterly, and I do not wonder, for I know that he felt deeply.

‘ So it came about that he made the settlement in the strange way that I have described to you. Then came your pleading and my love pleaded with you. My love also enabled

me to hold to my engagement to go away ; but I was under no bond not to return, and, therefore, I consented to be with you again at the end of a year, if you were still faithful.

‘ I know you will say all this was only a proof of my doubt of you ; if you knew what I have suffered and am suffering, you would own that it is a proof of my love.

‘ Now, you understand why I left you, and why my conduct has been so strange. When I said that I wished to go, I spoke truly. I did and do wish to go for your sake. But, oh, how gladly shall I return !—for if I do, it will be to you, and you and I will know that neither fortune nor time can alter our feelings to each other.’

CHAPTER XII.

THE DUCKPOND BY MOONLIGHT.

DAHLIA's conduct struck everyone in the house as peculiar on the day after her journey to London with Stephen—she was so shy and modest. She, who was something of a romp in her gaiety, whose merry voice—and it was a musical voice—sounded above the voices of all the others, was now silent and subdued. She moved about with downcast looks, and was strangely timid whenever Stephen was near.

She seemed almost afraid to lift her eyes when he was by ; but when he turned away they followed him with a pathetic, longing gaze.

The mother and the girls noted all this, and were very curious to know the meaning of it. To Mrs. Meredith she was singularly gentle and affectionate ; but when that lady inquired what had happened to account for this sudden change, she implored her not to ask at present. Mrs. Meredith was a clever woman, as Mr. Bassnett said, and discreetly held her tongue.

To the girls Dahlia was unusually tender ; but when amongst them she spoke little, and that only by fits and starts. She was very much abstracted, sighing often, as it seemed unconsciously, but occasionally detecting herself she would look vexed, as if ashamed of her folly. Then she would make an effort to be gay as usual. But it was quite evident that the effort was a great strain, and gradually she would subside again into silence and sighs.

The sentimental young ladies, aware of her attachment to their brother, sympathised with her and whispered amongst themselves—



‘ Stephen has been unkind to her yesterday. How nasty of him ! ’

Jim, having asked her to join him in several amusements, and received a very sweet ‘ No ’ to all his proposals, summed the whole thing up to his own satisfaction. With the sage experience of his years, inspired by his contempt for womankind in general, and for sentimental ones in particular, he thus declared —to himself, for he knew that his sisters would only scold him if he said it to them—

‘ She’s trying it on. What an ass Stephen is not to see it ! I can see it with half an eye. She won’t come to skate, won’t she ! Oh, we’ll see when he asks her ! ’

And he went off to skate by himself.

In the evening Stephen went into the library before the lamps were lit. He heard the rustle of a woman’s dress, and he knew that it was Dahlia by the perfume—for it was one of her weaknesses to use the most

sickly-sweet scents—and he spoke in some surprise—

‘ Why are you here in the dark, Dahlia ? ’

She did not answer, and she was evidently trying to make her escape without speaking, but was stopped by the entrance of a servant who had followed his master with lights. Then she drew back, turning her face away from Stephen.

‘ What is the matter ? ’ he asked when they were alone.

‘ I am so sorry, Stephen—I am so ashamed about last night,’ she said timidly.

Then she hurried away, but not before he saw the tears in her eyes, and he knew she had gone to shut herself up in her room to have what women call ‘ a good cry.’

He was distressed about her as day by day went by and there was no return to her usual bright, coquettish manner. She seemed to be always pleased when he spoke to her,

but she carefully avoided being alone with him.

When this subdued, melancholy state had continued for a week, his mother spoke to him.

‘That girl will fall into a sickness if she goes on much longer in this way. She does not eat, and keeps herself shut up in the house—it would make anybody ill. I wish we could do something for her, Stephen, for I am getting most anxious about her. But she will do nothing for us, although I believe she would go out if you were to ask her. I wish you would, to please me.’

He had not thought of that; and, as he had a feeling that her present state was partly due to her notion that she had offended him, he was ready to take this means of satisfying her that she had not. So he did ask her that evening at dinner, and on the spot a skating party was arranged for the following day.

They went out—three of the girls and Jim with them.

They were all very merry on the ice, and on the way home; the colour returned to Dahlia's cheeks, and from that day she rapidly recovered her former blithe ways.

‘I am glad to see you yourself again,’ said Mrs. Meredith cheerily, and with a significant smile, ‘I think there is some one else who is pleased too.’

‘Do you think so?’ exclaimed Dahlia, eagerly.

‘I am sure of it. Now, I want you to look your best to-night, because Mr. Rapier is coming, and as he is the only one who is permitted to see Mr. Dotridge, I want him to take back as good a report of you as possible.’

‘I’ll try,’ was the response. ‘But not for Mr. Rapier’s sake,’ she mentally added.

The evening was clear, dry, and bright.

The full moon made the orchard a picture in black and white, and the trees cast fantastic shadows on the ground. The duckpond became a brilliant little lake, in which there were curious silhouettes of surrounding objects.

Two of the figures reflected in the pond were those of a tall man and a lady. They had halted as if to look at the other shadows, as well as their own perhaps. But they were not lovers, for the lady was saying somewhat petulantly—

‘Why did you ask me to come out here, Mr. Rapier, and ask me, too, in such a way that I could not refuse?’

‘Because it was such a beautiful night, Miss Whitcombe,’ answered Lewis Rapier, laughing.

‘If there was no other reason, let us return to the house at once.’

‘Ah, you are angry because you are afraid that Meredith may be displeased. Is that so?’

‘I do not care for moonlight walks,’ she answered evasively.

He was studying her face as well as he could by the light of the moon. The face was very pretty but pale in the moonlight. He could learn nothing from it, however, except that she was frowning.

‘There, I shall not keep you long,’ he said, ‘but I thought you would be pleased to see an old friend, and would like to have a few moments’ conversation alone with him. I have another reason for asking you to come, but before telling you I want to remove that frown.’

‘I don’t think you can.’

‘Wrong. I am quite sure it will go when I tell you that by appearing to coquet with me, Meredith may be piqued into saying something that will please you.’

The frown disappeared.

‘I thought so,’ continued Rapier, sarcasti-

cally. ‘Now I can tell you what I really wished you to come out for. Mr. Dotridge is going away shortly for an indefinite period, very likely to die. You know his wishes regarding yourself?’

‘Yes; too well,’ she responded, bitterly.

‘Then—will you answer frankly—have you hope now of obtaining your fortune?’

‘I cannot say.’

She was much agitated, and her head was bowed. He spoke earnestly, and in a low voice.

‘You know how anxious I am for your welfare; you know that I am your true friend still, although you have so lightly turned away from one you once——’

‘Stop; do not speak of that,’ she said, as if she were half-frightened. ‘It was folly, and you know the conditions under which I am here.’

‘You call it folly; you did not do so then.’

‘Oh, be silent!’ she pleaded piteously; ‘there is some one coming. Let us walk on.’

‘Very well,’ he said calmly, ‘we shall say no more of that for the present. I do not excuse the strange conditions Dotridge has made; but I am anxious to know that in obeying them you are happy and have some prospect of winning your fortune.’

‘I am happy,’ was the hurried answer, ‘and I believe there is every prospect Oh, it is cruel to force me to say this!’

‘I would not like to think that I was cruel —I who am doing my best to serve you.’

‘I was afraid you would get cold, Dahlia,’ said the quiet voice of Stephen as he came up to them, ‘and I have brought a shawl for you.’

Dahlia bit her lips with chagrin. She was not taken by surprise, for the sound of the footsteps on the hard, crisp ground had warned her of his approach. Her chagrin was due to

disappointment, for she had been impressed at once by the probability that her strange friend's manœuvre would prove successful, and that Stephen would be piqued—perhaps even a little jealous—on account of her moonlight ramble with Mr. Rapier. She would have been pleased if he had spoken coldly; she would have been delighted had he displayed passion, or anything else, to indicate that his feelings for her differed from those he had towards other women.

But no! he came to her for the plain, commonplace reason that he was ‘afraid she would get cold!’ A grandmother would have done as much.

‘You are so very kind, Stephen,’ she said with sarcastic politeness and suppressed passion, as she allowed him to place the shawl round her.

CHAPTER XIII.

A PROBLEM TO SOLVE.

THERE was a smile on Rapier's face and this question in his mind—

‘Is he acting? if so, it is very well done. Or, is he indifferent as to whether she flirts or loves? if so, my little arrangement with Mrs. Meredith has only succeeded in bringing him after us to prove to her that his regard is only that of a brother. . . . But no, a brother would not put on her shawl so carefully. She must feel that and be satisfied for the present.’

Both Dahlia and Rapier were somewhat out in their estimate of Stephen's motives. He

was not indifferent as to her conduct, and when his mother had suggested that he should take a shawl to her, as she had gone out with Mr. Rapier too thinly cloaked for the season, and the time she was staying, he was not pleased.

But there was not a shade of jealousy in his displeasure.

‘I do not like her or any of the girls receiving attention from Mr. Rapier,’ he had said hastily, and went out immediately.

That was misinterpreted by his mother, of course, and she was glad that this strange friend of the family had come to speed the wooing.

But what he meant was this: with every disposition to like Rapier, he had always experienced a feeling of repulsion when near him, although the man had in every way endeavoured to prove himself a friend. He remembered the strong doubt of him which crossed

his mind that night when, as he was leaving Kemerton, Rapier suggested that it was pure selfishness which induced Ruth to go away.

As if she could be selfish! He would trust her on that score at any rate; whatever her motive for this cruel separation might be selfishness had nothing to do with it. He would have felt contempt for his nearest friend if he had suggested such a thing. It will be noted that, like all true lovers, as time and space increased between them, his ideal Ruth became nobler and more beautiful than ever.

Then he remembered Ruth's warning to beware of this man, and he had profound faith in her keen insight into character. To crown all, Dahlia was, as he understood, an heiress, and Rapier was a man professedly poor, and of whom nothing more was known than that he was a friend of Mr. Dotridge, to whom he had been useful in various confidential and important matters of business.

All these things made Stephen feel displeased that she should be showing this man anything more than ordinary courtesy.

‘ You read poetry, Meredith ? ’ said Rapier, gaily.

‘ Yes, sometimes,’ was the dry response, ‘ when I find it in an agricultural almanac.’

Rapier laughed so heartily that it was almost infectious; and it certainly had the effect of dispelling the cloud of awkwardness which for a moment overhung the party.

‘ Ah, if that is all, I am afraid you will not be able to understand the—what shall I call it?—sentimental nonsense of Miss Whitcombe and myself. We came out to enjoy the effects of the moonlight, and we have been trying to exaggerate the duckpond into a lake. You come with your confounded common sense in the shape of a shawl and—whew ! away goes poetry, and we immediately begin to think of influenzas and rheumatism.’

‘And a very good thing for yourself if you happen to think of them before they arrive. But we seldom do that. What a pity it is that we are so proud when we overcome an illness, and have not the slightest regard for the ill we escape.’

‘Natural ingratitude of mankind,’ said Rapier, with mock solemnity. ‘A friend lends you five shillings, and you think nothing of it: he refuses to lend it, and you think a great deal of it.’

‘Well, I think a good deal about colds and rheumatics,’ said Dahlia, with one of her pretty shudders, ‘and, if you please, I should like to go indoors.’

‘Can you not be tempted to walk down as far as the river? The willows at the foot of the meadow must present a charming effect in this light,’ said Rapier.

But she knew that he was trying to bait

Stephen, and had no real desire for her to go
She certainly had none herself.

‘I don’t like willows even by moonlight,
and beside a river,’ she replied coldly; ‘they
always suggest misfortune of some kind to me.
Besides, you think I should go in, Stephen, do
you not?’

‘Decidedly, unless you prepare yourself for
a good swinging walk. Dawdling about here
in the orchard may be pretty and poetical, but
it is not healthy.’

‘What a prosaic beggar you are!’ exclaimed
Rapier, laughing.

They escorted Dahlia to the house. At the
door Rapier, who had been chattering merrily
all the way, turned to Stephen.

‘Suppose we take a turn and a cigar to-
gether? I have no notion of sleep yet, and I
suppose the ladies will be pleased to dispense
with our attendance as it is so late.’

‘All right, come along,’ said Stephen some-

what irritably, for he felt that Rapier was not being treated as a guest ought to be, and yet he could not help himself ; so he made an effort to show that he wished to make him comfortable.

‘ Try one of these Partagas. I got them as a special favour from a man who professes to have special knowledge of tobaccos, and he assured me they are the best things of the kind that can be procured.’

They passed round the orchard and down the meadow towards the river. It was certainly a good cigar Rapier had given him, and Stephen enjoyed it. At the same time he wished that it had come from the hand of any-one else. His dislike for the man increased rapidly from the moment they had been standing together beside Dahlia at the duckpond ; and the curious fancy crossed his mind that if Rapier wanted to administer poison to any-body, it would be done with the same flourish

and assurances as those with which he had given him the cigar. He smoked viciously, not enjoying the tobacco at all now, but wondering how he should deal with this man.

‘I wanted to have a little chat with you alone, Meredith,’ said Rapier, after they had been walking and smoking some time in silence.

‘Well, here we are. You cannot be more alone with me than you are at present.’

Rapier smoked meditatively, and looked at the moon as if he were seeking from it some inspiration as to the right course to pursue. Then emitting a great whiff and holding his cigar daintily between his fingers, poised in the air—

‘Will you pardon me what is really a most impudent question?’

‘If I can answer the question I shall do so,’ replied Stephen, cautiously. He did not like the opening of his companion’s address.

‘I am going to be quite frank with you, and I hope you will be the same with me. The question is about Miss Whitcombe.’

Rapier paused, took another whiff, and looked at his companion with the air of one who has said something profound, and expects respectful acknowledgment of it.

‘The subject is agreeable enough,’ was all Stephen said.

‘Undoubtedly, and under ordinary circumstances I should have no difficulty in speaking of her—under any circumstances I can have no difficulty in praising her. Pretty, witty, and good-tempered, I believe, she deserves a good husband.’

‘I quite agree with you on that subject,’ said Stephen coldly, as he glanced sideways at the man, wondering what he was driving at.

‘Very well, now comes the question for which I have apologised in advance—I never like to poach on a friend’s ground or I would

not trouble you with it. Miss Whitcombe must have many wooers, and I ask you frankly, is there any probability of you becoming one of them ?'

Stephen threw away his cigar, halted and turned to his companion.

' Frankness begets frankness,' he said, sharply, ' and therefore I will answer you. I believe you know enough of my affairs to understand that there is not the slightest probability of my seeking Dahlia's hand. But this you do not know—that whatever influence I have with the girl I shall use against your suit if you think of entering the lists.'

Here is what Rapier thought—

' Good ; he is in a temper, and claims the position of protector. He has warmer feeling for her than he thinks himself.'

This is what he said—

' Thank you, Meredith, but I did not mean to offend you, and I did not say that I intended

to enter the lists for her hand, although I think it is well worth winning. However, if I should be tempted to try my fortune in that direction, I shall know what to expect from you. In the meanwhile we need not quarrel about impossibilities.'

'I hope there may be no need to quarrel at all.'

'I am glad to hear you say so, for just now I had an uncomfortable feeling that we were approaching something of the kind. What o'clock is it with you? I make it twenty to twelve.'

'You are a little fast; it is only half-past eleven.'

'Well, by the time we reach the house I dare say it will be midnight, and then I shall be at liberty to give you some news which will surprise you.'

When they entered the library it was still ten minutes from the hour, according to the

clock on the mantelpiece. Stephen was surprised to find that his mother had not yet gone to bed, and he was still more surprised to find that she was waiting for them by arrangement with Rapier. The latter chatted with the lady about trifles, and did not by word or look indicate that he had anything important to communicate. Even whilst the clock was striking he continued to talk about the prospects of the weather. But when the last stroke sounded, he stopped, and his manner changed.

‘I am free to speak now, although I am certainly making use of my liberty at the very earliest moment. There is nothing very serious in what I have to tell you; it is only to make you acquainted with another of Mr. Dotridge’s freaks.’

‘What has he been doing now?’ inquired Stephen carelessly; but his mother looked anxious.

‘Making away with himself.’

‘What?’ exclaimed mother and son, startled.

‘You need not be alarmed; I only mean that he has secretly left Kemerton, and even I was not permitted to know whither he was bound.’

‘When did he go?’ inquired Mrs. Meredith.

‘In the beginning of December, immediately after he had completed his business arrangements with Bassnett.’

‘He is a most singular man. I can scarcely realise that all these weeks, whilst we have been thinking of him shut up in his room at Kemerton, he has been away,’ continued the lady, quite as much amazed as if she had heard that her mysterious relative had committed suicide.

‘Yes; he wished to have no leave-takings, he said, and he made me promise not to make known his absence before to-day. He wants

to disappear from the world and to be regarded as one dead.'

'It is a strange wish,' said Stephen, thoughtfully, 'for a man so wealthy and successful.'

They did not know that he lacked the crown of wealth and success—Love.

CHAPTER XIV.

RUTH WRITES AGAIN.

‘I DID not know how much I should feel this separation from you, Stephen, and from my home until the second week after we sailed. The pain seemed to be bad enough at the time, but the excitement of it all helped me to bear it. When the excitement and bustle were over, the pain became agony. If you could have found me during that second week you would not have required to speak more than one persuading word to make me stay at home. When I say home I do not mean Kemerton ; to the exile the word means England.

‘Day and night my thoughts were with

you, but I could not write although I tried it several times. I always saw you standing on the shore, looking after the ship and frowning at me for my desertion.

‘That was very hard to bear, and it was the more hard to bear knowing that a few words would have removed the cloud, and caused you to pity me and not be angry with me. But I could not speak these words and for a whole year you must continue to think of me as cruel, capricious, and faithless. . . . That is wrong. I am sure you were not thinking of me so unkindly. You are hoping, as I am hoping, and at the end of the year we shall meet, and you will have proved to me, to Mr. Dotridge, and everyone, that neither time nor space can take your heart from me.

‘Thinking that way made me feel better. I seemed to grow stronger as soon as I had cast out from my mind all doubt of you. I know that the test is a severe one; but I am

sure now that you will stand it nobly. The only thing that disturbs me is the conviction that I am unworthy of such a love as yours. But I will try with all my might to make you happy when we join hands again.

‘I must try to get away from myself a little and tell you about what is going on around me. The Captain has been very kind, and does everything to make me comfortable. His wife is very anxious to do what she can for me, but she is seldom able to be out of her cabin. She tells me that it is the same with her on every voyage, and yet she persists in accompanying her husband. He says it is an unfortunate mania, and not to be cured. I like her all the more for it, because she must be very fond of him to endure this discomfort for the simple purpose of being with him.

‘I am sure Captain Mackay admires her for it himself, for he is very good-natured, and although he pretends to make fun of her for

you, but I could not write although I tried it several times. I always saw you standing on the shore, looking after the ship and frowning at me for my desertion.

‘That was very hard to bear, and it was the more hard to bear knowing that a few words would have removed the cloud, and caused you to pity me and not be angry with me. But I could not speak these words and for a whole year you must continue to think of me as cruel, capricious, and faithless. That is wrong. I am sure you were not thinking of me so unkindly. You are hoping, as I am hoping, and at the end of the year we shall meet, and you will have proved to me, to Mr. Dotridge, and everyone, that neither time nor space can take your heart from me.

‘Thinking that way made me feel better. I seemed to grow stronger as soon as I had cast out from my mind all doubt of you. I know that the test is a severe one; but I am

voyage to Australia as a last chance of restoration. I wonder why they could not have been sent out before it became a *last* resort. The third gentleman would have interested you very much. He is a sheep farmer, and has been to England making arrangements about the transport of tinned mutton. He is remarkably intelligent about sheep, but has little to say on any other subject ; and indeed I am not in the mood to find out the best qualities of anyone with whom I may come in contact.

‘There is one of the steerage passengers who interests me very much, because I have seen so little of him ! He is always on deck when I come up and always disappears below the moment he sees me. I do not think this is on account of anything dreadful in my appearance, but it is a curious circumstance that whenever I come up he goes down.

‘I have made friends with all the other steerage passengers, and especially with a

woman, who, with three children, is going out to her husband, a baker, in Sydney. She tells me that the man who has interested me by his droll conduct has a private berth in the steerage, and that he seems to be a particular friend of the Captain, who often visits him. He sleeps all day and is up all night, so that the other passengers see very little of him. No doubt that is why his ways have seemed to me so peculiar.

• • • • •

‘I do not yet feel quite sure that I am in my right senses ; the event is so utterly bewildering, and—painful is the only word I can find to express my meaning without exaggeration. But the embarrassment to me cannot be exaggerated. And yet he pledges himself not to come near me, not even to show himself on deck during the remainder of the passage if that is my will.

‘I do not know what to say, but perhaps I

may gain steadiness by setting down here the particulars of the whole occurrence.

‘ We have been passing through a series of heavy gales. On Monday evening a great wave swept over the vessel, it stove in what they call the booby hatch, broke down part of the bulwark at one side, caught me in its terrible embrace, and slung me along with irresistible strength. I would certainly have been carried overboard, but I got jammed against the cabin railing, and someone caught me by the arm and held me securely, so that the next wave passed without doing me any more harm than increasing the wetness of my clothes.

‘ I lost consciousness, however, and when I came to myself, I asked the captain where my preserver was. I remember now how awkward he looked, but I did not think of it at the time.

“ “ It was just one of the steerage folk that happened to be at hand. He does not

expect any reward, so you need not trouble yourself about him."

"I had no thought of giving him any other reward than my thanks."

"Ah, weel, they'll keep till he gets better ; at this minute he is clean knocked up wi' the worry and excitement o' the thing. Be patient, and he'll come to you. He's a stout and honest chappie, but he has got an awful dookin'."

I became feverish and was for a couple of days unable to rise. The good Captain had occupied much of his time in seeking information about the man who had saved me. At least so he said, and I concluded that, as he had to seek information about him, the man could not be such an intimate friend as the baker's wife had led me to believe.

At last I was able to be on deck again, and the Captain, after some hesitation, led forward my preserver.

'The man was Mr. Dotridge ! '

CHAPTER XV.

THE MAN WHO SPECULATES IS LOST.

MRS. MEREDITH had a few words in private with Mr. Rapier before he left Derewood Grange. It was in the morning after breakfast when Stephen had gone with the veterinary surgeon to examine a valuable bullock which was threatened with the plague. This had been a source of great anxiety to him, for if the plague should seize upon his unusually large stock of cattle, the loss would involve almost immediate ruin.

Mrs. Meredith was able to speak freely to Mr. Rapier : first, because she regarded him as a sort of agent of Mr. Dotridge, and believed he

knew more about that gentleman's arrangements than anyone else: secondly, because he thoroughly understood the real state of Stephen's affairs; and lastly, because—without any distinct conspiracy between them—he had become her firm ally in her endeavour to bring about a marriage between her son and Dahlia Whitcombe.

They were in the library. Rapier was speaking with that air of perfect frankness which usually disposed people in his favour.

‘I do not think you need disturb yourself in the least, **Mrs. Meredith**, and if you will leave things to run their own course I am satisfied you will have your wish.’

‘I am glad you think so; but it is now more than two months since Ruth went away, and although he does not speak of her I know that he is constantly thinking of her.’

‘Very likely, and I admire him for it; but he is also thinking about Miss Whitcombe.

She has decidedly a very tender regard for him—anybody can see that.'

'But he does not see it, and I am really most anxious about the poor girl; for his indifference has hurt her a great deal, and I am sure that a final disappointment would cause her serious injury.'

'Oh, she would survive!' said Rapier reassuringly, and smiling as he thought of Dahlia's character as he understood it; 'that is, she would survive the loss of him; the loss of the fortune is another affair.'

'You do her injustice, Mr. Rapier; for I am greatly deceived if she is thinking of the fortune at all now.'

'She will make the better wife, then; and she is the more worthy of your son. But what is of importance to you in the meanwhile is that she cares so much for him, and that he is interested in her. He is concerned about her future, as he gave me very plainly to understand

when we were in the meadow last night ; he is even speculating about the sort of person who would make a suitable husband for her, and, you know, once the thoughts are turned in that direction the man who speculates is lost. Be patient, do not interfere, and I prophesy that all will go well.'

'I hope you may prove a true prophet,' said Mrs. Meredith, a little doubtfully ; 'but I wish matters could be hastened.'

'His embarrassments may help to do that. I don't like to be a bearer of ill tidings, but I may tell you in confidence that I know he has some very serious difficulties before him.'

'I am aware of that,' said the mother sighing ; 'and now that Mr. Dotridge is away I do not see what we are to do. I hope you will be with us soon again.'

'You must invite me, and of course you can always summon me by note or by

telegram addressed to the Cosmos, if you should happen to require my assistance in any way. You know how glad I always am to serve you.'

When the prophet Rapier was taking leave of Dahlia he whispered—

‘I wish you would tell me what you would like for a wedding present.’

‘Certainly—your card with P.P.C. on it,’ she answered coldly.

‘Cruel,’ he exclaimed, smiling reproachfully, and he went away.

There was no doubt that so far as friendship was concerned, Rapier was correct in saying that Stephen was interested in Dahlia. He had apparently quite forgotten what had occurred that foggy night in the train, and she did nothing to remind him of it; but there was something subdued in her manner now which pleased him.

Without giving him the slightest sense of

obtrusiveness she was always near him whenever he wanted anything, and, without his being conscious of any special change in their relationship, she gradually obtained the place of intimate companion and friend, to whom he spoke freely of whatever gave him pleasure or worried him.

He found her sympathy and hopefulness more and more helpful to him as day by day his embarrassments increased. What he had dreaded took place; the plague broke out amongst the cattle, and the whole stock had to be destroyed. Then foot-and-mouth disease attacked the sheep, and about the middle of spring Stephen Meredith found himself face to face with absolute ruin.

But the worst blow of all came in a telegram from Mr. Bassnett. It was short but terrible in its brevity.

FROM *P. Basenett,*
Sergeant's Inn.

To *Stephen Meredith,*
Derewood Grange,
Dunthorpe.

News just received. The 'Eucalyptus' a complete wreck. Only the first mate with two of the crew and three steerage passengers saved. Shall telegraph the moment any further news arrives.

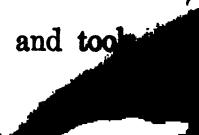
Stephen stood quite still with the paper in his hand. His face became sickly white; but he felt nothing for the first few moments—he was stunned.

‘For heaven’s sake, Stephen, what is the matter?’ cried the mother.

He made no reply, but a curious, mocking, bitter smile gradually overspread his face, and distorted the features as with acute pain.

‘Can you not speak?’ almost shrieked the mother, frightened by his look and his silence.

Dahlia stepped softly up to him and took



the paper from his nerveless hand. The blood left her cheeks, and her eyes started wildly when she read it.

‘The ship is wrecked—Ruth is drowned,’ she said in a low voice that was full of terror, for she felt as if in some mysterious way she were guilty of murder.

She had wished that Ruth might never come back to England; she had thought of the dangers of the sea, and she had sometimes vaguely tried to imagine what would happen if the *Eucalyptus* should be wrecked. These thoughts came back to her now with bitter reproach; she trembled with shame and remorse. The sight of his dumb agony frightened her, and yet she could not take her eyes away from him.

‘The ship wrecked—Ruth drowned,’ echoed Mrs. Meredith bewilderedly. ‘What does it all mean? I don’t understand. Who says that she is drowned?’

Still silence, but that hideous smile gradually disappeared.

‘Poor Stephen !’ moaned Dahlia at last, and at that moment with the vision in her mind’s eye of Ruth’s dead form floating upon the great sea, and with Stephen so cold and motionless before her, she would have been willing to change places with the woman who had hitherto seemed to be the only barrier between her and happiness.



CHAPTER XVI.

RUTH'S LAST NOTES.

‘IT is three weeks since I have been able to write anything, and during nearly all that time it seemed as if I should never be able to use the pen again. The storms through which we have passed have been to me terrible, and the captain tells me that he has not experienced such severe weather for nearly twenty years. The ship is greatly disabled, and it is impossible that it could pass safely through such another series of gales.

‘There is a lull to-day, and although the sea is still rolling high and angrily, I can manage to jot down a sentence at intervals. I make the effort to write even in this fragment-

ary way, because I am most anxious to record what has occurred. Death has been and is still so near to us all that I cannot shut my eyes to the possibility of never reaching land. There is another possibility, however—that the box in which I shall place this book may be washed ashore or picked up by some ship more fortunate than ours; and with this faint hope I strive to write.

‘It comforts and strengthens me to imagine that if the worst happens, you may learn, Stephen, at some remote time how abiding my love has been to you.

• • • • •
‘The captain was smiling as if he had only taken part in some good-natured joke when he brought Mr. Dotridge forward to me.

““You see you have more friends on board than you kenned,” he said, and turned away, leaving us alone together.

My amazement was so great that I could

not speak, although it seemed to me in my bewilderment as if I had called his name aloud many times. The mere fact of his presence there was so extraordinary that I did not at first pay any attention to the change in his appearance

* When I had last seen him at Kemerton he was an invalid, scarcely able to venture unaided from one part of the house to another; surrounded by every luxury and carefully guarded against the least disturbance. Here he was now in plain, homely garments, standing firmly on the deck, and apparently well able to take care of himself. His face had lost much of its sallowness; his eyes were clear and unaffected by the light, which used to cause them so much pain. Had not the serious nature of his long illness been known to me I never would have suspected that this man had walked out from the gateway of the grave.

‘ He looked ten—nay, twenty years—
younger than when I said good-bye to him in
his own room. Of course, the surroundings
and the darkness there might easily have
deceived anyone as to his real condition ; but
it could not have deceived me, as I was so
much with him. I knew that during the last
few months he had seemed to be gaining
strength rapidly in spite of the dreadful verdict
which the physicians finally pronounced. But
certainly the improvement was not so rapid as
to account for the change I saw in him
now.

‘ If the time since I saw him last had been
in reality as long as my suffering made it seem
to me, there could not have been a greater
difference between the man as he was then and
as he appeared now. The two consumptive
passengers were in comparison only subjects
for the undertaker ; he was a hale man, likely
to live many years.

‘ He relieved me from my confusion and amazement by speaking first.

‘ I will do my best to set down accurately all that occurred. I know you will resent some of it, Stephen ; that you will tell me I ought never to have placed myself in a position where such passages were possible, and I know that you are right. I ought not to have left you, I ought not to have left England. But it was done, and I would have been more than human—certainly more than woman—if I had not sympathised with him.

‘ “ Try not to be angry with me, Ruth,” he said, in such a low voice that with the wild rushing sound of the waves, and the wind whistling around us I could scarcely hear his words. “ I did not mean you to know that I was on board. These gales, your accident and repeated request to see the man who had helped you, overcame my resolution. I could not help coming when you sent for me so often,

although aware that you would be annoyed and perhaps angry."

"Why did you not tell me that you were to sail in the *Eucalyptus*?" I asked, much distressed by the position in which his presence placed me. "I understood that you were going to the South of France."

He looked at me reproachfully, and it was impossible to avoid feeling that, somehow, I deserved a rebuke for my ingratitude.

"You know that you would not have sailed in the same ship with me," he answered very quietly; "and I did not think it necessary that you should know I was here. My whole object was to be near you, ready to help you if any peril should arise; to see you safely landed, or—yes, I must speak it—or to go down with you if ill befell the ship. . . . You do not know what a fool I am about you."

He spoke the last words bitterly, as if

would almost have been glad to have had other feelings regarding me.

““When you knew that I would not sail in the same ship,” I said, trying to speak resolutely, but without unkindness, “was it not cruelly unjust to me to come on board by stealth?”

““I can see nothing unjust in it, and although you have used the word, I know you cannot feel that there is anything cruel in it.”

““I wish it had not happened,” was all that I could say..

‘At that there came over his face an expression which I had never seen before; it passed so quickly now that I cannot well describe it, but there were in it feelings of pity and vexation.

““My presence cannot interfere with any of your prospects or hopes,” he said, earnestly. “In any case you ought to be travelling under my care, and you need not be afraid of anyone

being disturbed on that account, because what has passed between us is still our secret; and besides there is absolutely nobody at home who is acquainted with my whereabouts."

"Mr. Rapier?" I suggested.

"Not even he, although he is aware that I am not shut up at Kemerton as other people suppose, and after a certain time he will be at liberty to tell anyone who inquires that I am away from home. My cabin was prepared as for an intimate friend of mine who desired great privacy. The people in the office were directed to hold me responsible for all expenses, and that of course satisfied them. As for Captain Mackay, we were several days out at sea before he was made aware that his eccentric passenger was the owner of the ship."

"But how were you able to venture to do this without having somebody with you?" I asked, bewildered by the account of all the trouble he had taken.

“I cannot answer that, Ruth, without touching upon the subject which I know you wish to avoid. I am afraid it cannot be avoided altogether. Shall I speak ? ”

‘I knew quite well what he meant, Stephen, but I do not know exactly what impulse it was that made me say “yes” to his question. This is one of the things which you will be vexed with me for ; but if you had seen his pitiful look and remembered the great kindness he had shown me—remembered, too, that all he was doing now was because he cared so much for me—I think you would not blame me for wishing to show him that I was not so ungrateful as to be unable to trust him to speak freely.

‘I can trust him and myself too, for your place in my thoughts can never be affected except by one thing, and that is the impossible event of your proving false to me.

“You gave me strength to act as I have done,” he said ; “but do not alarm yourself, I

shall not take advantage of your permission to speak by saying more than is necessary to enable you to understand why I am here. When the doctors told me on what a feeble thread my life depended I made, as you are aware, such arrangements as a man on his deathbed ought to make ; but I had no intention of continuing mere existence under such terrible conditions as those imposed on me. No creature could shut out emotion of every kind even with all the safeguards money and will could provide. I had the money but not the will—that was taken from me by you.”

“ “ I do not like to hear that,” I said, turning my face away, for it seemed as if he were accusing me of doing something wrong. “ No man needs to surrender his will to anyone.”

“ “ You may as well say no man needs to love. I was quite able to follow out my instructions as far as to live without hating anybody ; but without love I could not, for that



had full possession of me when the doom was pronounced. Once before—long ago—I had thought myself so possessed; with the passionate imagination of youth I endowed a woman with all the attributes of my ideal of what a woman should be, and found myself bitterly mistaken. There was a great blank after that, and at length you came to teach me that love is not a passion but a faith."

"How can you be sure that you are not mistaken in me also?"

"I cannot be sure—I have faith, and that is all; but such faith is everything. Men moved by its spirit have toiled on through hardships that would have been misery without it; and when the need came they have died calmly for it. That is what I am prepared to do now."

"What can you mean?"

"I ought not to have asked that; I ought to have stopped him at once; but the idea had

come into my head that I should allow him to speak on now, so that I might have the more authority for insisting upon his pledge that he would never again approach this subject.

““To live for you, if I can ; to die for you if it must be,” he replied simply. “Do not think there is any ridiculous rhodomontade in what I am saying, Ruth ; it may sound far-fetched, but the meaning is plain. After our first conversation about this matter you decided to go to Australia. I determined not to interfere beyond giving Stephen some inducement to accept the happiness which was at his door so that I might find my happiness too.”

““I have already told you that you acted cruelly to us all in the course you adopted,” I interrupted, feeling angry again.

““And I have already answered that I do not think so, and did not mean to be so. If he stands the test——”

““He *will* stand the test, and if he can for-



give my unworthy doubt of him, I shall give my whole life to the endeavour to make up for the pain I have caused him."

' He spoke so sadly in reply that I instantly repented being so harsh with him.

" " If he stands the test," was what he said, " I cannot say, and you would not have me say that it will be a pleasant thing for me. But I will step aside and do what may be in my power to help to secure your happiness. As for Dahlia, I shall make other arrangements for her ; but they cannot be so satisfactory as the one I have made for her now."

" " Why, then, when you are prepared to be so generous, Mr. Dotridge, why have you risked compelling me to say that after we reach land we must never meet again ? "

" " What have I done to make you even think of coming to such a cruel resolution ? "

" " You are here, on board this vessel with me, and that fact, taken into account with my

having left Stephen without giving him full explanation, may be and will be interpreted to my disadvantage."

"I will take care that no mistake of that kind is made. Meanwhile I am here because of my longing to be near you. What I said to myself was that if the doctors were right, and that the penalty for any sudden emotion on my part was death, I would rather die near you, watching over you, than in fretting anxiety about you in my solitude at Kemerton. I spoke to one of the doctors, and he said that if I could stand the voyage it would be an excellent thing for me, and he thought it possible that I might entirely recover. He had known cases in which a bold step, such as I proposed, had proved completely successful. I think my case is one of them; for you see me now and you remember what I seemed to be only a few weeks ago."

"I shall be glad if the voyage does you



good," I said, whilst trying to make up my mind how to act under the circumstances.

"I believe it will restore me to sound health, and at any rate I am near you, and for that I would risk anything."

"Then let this be the last word between us on that subject."

"Until the year is out, yes. Should you wish it I will not come aft again until you send for me, unless some danger compels me to seek you."

To this I did not reply at the moment; but after thinking it out I told him that it was nonsense to behave like two children sulking with one another. It was a great pity he was there, but being there I should not be the cause of making him a prisoner in his cabin. There was no reason why we should not meet as freely as we had done at Kemerton.

The look of joy which came into his face when I told him this made me hasten to re-

mind him that the One subject was definitely closed between us, and that any reference to it again would send me at once to my cabin, from which nothing would induce me to stir until we reached land.

“I'll do exactly as you wish, Ruth. I am well content with this arrangement, for it is much more than I expected when I came on board, and it makes me quite happy for the time being.”

‘He said this so meekly that it was almost amusing ; he was like a youth promising obedience to the stern commands of his guardian. Certainly no one would have recognised in him the master of Kemerton, the cool, clear-headed speculator, and the leader in so many daring commercial enterprises.

‘I sympathise deeply with him, and wish to be kindly to him. There seems to be something very hard in his fate—that in all the affairs of the world he should have achieved



such great success—that the biggest prizes for which men struggle and wear out their lives should have been so early won by him, and he denied the power to enjoy them. First his health robbed him of the ordinary pleasures at his command ; and now this hopeless affection for me threatens to destroy his last chance of deriving any benefit at all from his wonderful prosperity.

‘I know that I may be kind to him ; for he will neither misunderstand me nor attempt to take the least advantage of my feelings for him. Since our conversation he has been considerate in every way ; gentle and simple in his conduct towards me, ready to come and go at the slightest sign.

• • • •
‘I am glad now that he is with me ; I feel less of an exile ; and it needed the reassuring voice of an old friend to sustain me through the terrors of these storms.

'There is some great commotion going on overhead now. There seems to be great rushing about the deck and I hear loud voices. The Captain warned me that I was to be prepared for—'



CHAPTER XVII.

LOVE'S REQUIEM.

DAHLIA's piteous moan roused Stephen. He turned slowly, and very quietly took the telegram from her. He touched the fair head softly with his hand, as if he would thank her for her sympathy and say, 'Be of good cheer.'

Then he was moving silently from the room when his mother clasped both her hands on his arm.

'Stephen, for God's sake, speak! You look so strange that you frighten me. This news may not be true—it cannot be true, it is too terrible! It is only some wild rumour. You know how often ships are reported lost when they are only delayed at sea by some

accident, or contrary winds. Speak—say something. You must not leave me like this; tell me what you think.'

This appeal compelled him to make an effort to regain the power of speech, and he said huskily—

'I think it is true. . . . Don't be frightened, mother, I want to be alone for a little while. I'll be all right by-and-by.'

He went into the library and closed the door.

'Oh, how he loves her!' sobbed Dahlia, as she sat down, crossed her pretty arms on the table and hid her face on them. 'How he loves her! I'll never forget the look on his face after he read the telegram.'

It was not a time at which Mrs. Meredith could offer any consolation. She was too much awe-stricken by the tidings of the calamity and the effect it had on Stephen. She had been glad indeed to get Ruth out of the way, but

she had never once thought of her being removed by death. Although this unexpected event at once rendered the fulfilment of her wishes almost certain, she could not congratulate herself or feel any satisfaction in it.

She was a good-natured woman and a fond mother, notwithstanding the arts she practised to make Stephen accept the wife she had chosen for him rather than the one he had chosen for himself, and she was at that moment really grieved for Ruth's sad fate.

The consternation amongst the girls was for a little as great as if a member of the family had been lost, and it showed how much Ruth's calm, firm, wise nature had made itself felt even here, where the disposition was to dislike her because she had won away the big brother from them and from their favourite friend. When Jim heard the news—his mother told him in the afternoon when he returned from some sporting excursion—he looked angry and

was inclined to cry. Then he made one of the most biting speeches Mrs. Meredith and the girls had ever been doomed to hear.

'I believe it's all your fault. She would never have gone away if every one of you hadn't been so spiteful to her about Stephen.'

And he banged out of the room, leaving that sting in the minds of his mother and sisters. They were all miserably conscious of how they had shown their opposition to Ruth, as much by what they had not done as by what they had done. The eldest sister, Hat, was still absent, or she would have been excepted from Jim's sweeping condemnation.

Dahlia did not hear it, for she was in her room. Her door was locked and bolted as if she dreaded an invasion, or needed the help of bolts and bars to hide her own disturbed thoughts and remorse.

After the first shock of horror and consternation had passed, Stephen experienced nothing

more than a dull sensation of utter stupidity such as one feels when regaining consciousness after a heavy fall. He found it impossible to realise the position.

Ruth had gone away; Ruth was lost at sea; Ruth would never come back; Ruth was dead; he would never see her again!

These phrases were being sung in his brain with monotonous iteration, and yet they produced no wild agony, and did not seem to help him to understand how it could be that Ruth, with whom he had parted only the other day; Ruth, whose kiss was still warm upon his lips, would never come back to him! Yet she had promised to come in a year, or whenever he was in trouble, and she had never broken her promise. This time she could not keep it; Death barred the way.

There was an instant of impatience as he remembered how hard he had striven to dissuade her from making this fatal voyage,

and how obstinately she had persisted in it. But the impatience passed and then came the recollection of her grave, sweet face, of the tender eyes, the soft soothing voice, the gentle touch of her hand, her earnest eagerness to be helpful and useful to others—all the qualities which had made him love her were recalled ; everything that had made him at times irritable or downright angry with her was forgotten.

The longing—the wild yearning for her which rose within him produced actual physical pain. And it was all so simple. She had gone away in this vessel in spite of him—without any necessity for doing so, without any object of importance to serve for herself or anyone else ; and here was the end of it : Death !

Why could he not have held her back ? Why had he had no strength of will or love to make her stay ? If she had only waited for a



few weeks ! If she had only gone by another ship ! If he had only set her wishes at defiance and openly claimed the right to control her which she gave in professing to love him, all might have been well now. If—

But what was the use of all this speculation ? She was gone ; the *Eucalyptus* was a wreck, and Ruth was drowned. There was no more to be said.

But he could not thrust aside his vain regrets. Countless arguments which he might have used to stop her, and had not, crowded upon his brain, torturing him. How differently he would have acted, too, if he had not been at the time worried and distressed by his cursed financial difficulties ! How much bolder, how much more determined he would have been ! Then he would have said—

‘ No, you shall not go ; you are pledged to me ; you are mine. We shall be married to-morrow.’

And she would have yielded—he felt sure of that; but this cursed want of money had tied his tongue and hands, and she was lost in consequence.

It was horrible to sit brooding this way. If there had been anything for him to do—if he could be actively moving about something on her account he would have felt better. The grim thought flitted across his mind that he would have found some relief if he might even have had the poor satisfaction of seeing after the arrangements for her funeral. But there was absolutely nothing to do except sit down and wait for confirmation of the cruel tidings.

He started to his feet. Yes, there was one thing he could do which might distract his attention for a little. He could go to Bassnett and see if by any chance further news had arrived. He knew it was only a pretence to get into action of some sort, for Bassnett was well



aware of his interest in Ruth, and would not delay a moment in forwarding information as it arrived.

But he took the next train to London, all the same ; and with the result he expected. Bassnett knew nothing more than had been stated in his telegram. This bit of comfort was offered him, however—

‘The ship carried a valuable cargo,’ said the lawyer, in his dry but kindly way ; ‘and was heavily insured. The underwriters are as anxious about her fate as you can be, and will have the earliest information that can be procured. They have promised to keep me advised of whatever they learn, and you shall have it as fast as the telegraph can take it to you. Meanwhile a message has been sent to Mr. Dotridge’s agents in Sydney, and everything is being done in our power to obtain early details of the wreck.’

Stephen thanked him. Of course he had

been aware that he could not learn anything more that day, and he was annoyed with himself for the feeling of disappointment with which he left Sergeant's Inn. The journey did not relieve his depression in the least: the bustle and noise of the London streets seemed to make him the more acutely conscious of the silence of the grave within his breast. He would be glad to get into the country again—the quietude there was more in harmony with his mood, and so more likely to prove soothing. Consolation he did not think of; there can be no consolation to a man who feels that all he prized in the world, all he lived for, has been taken from him.

One sensible resolution he made as he sat in the train, that so far as it was in his power he would go through the ordinary routine of every-day life, showing as little as possible of his anguish to the others. He knew that mere mechanical submission to common-place duties

would help him more than anything else to overcome his gloom.

So, much to the relief of Mrs. Meredith, he was in his place at dinner. Dahlia was absent, feeling too ill to leave her room. All were very quiet. The shadow was upon them, but no reference was made to the calamity which caused it. Stephen did not think it was the time to make an effort to pretend to be at ease, and he could not have done so even if he would.

After dinner he went into the library. By instinctive recognition of the propriety of it, he was allowed to go alone and to remain undisturbed.

‘I don’t like to see Steve so down in the mouth,’ observed Jim to the family; ‘and I had half a mind to propose a game at chess; but I don’t believe he would know a king from a pawn to-night. What can any fellow of sense see in a woman to get into such a state

about her? Why if he had lost the Derby he could not be worse. You won't catch me mooning that way at any rate.'

'Wait till your time comes, sir,' said Miss Juliet (aged eighteen), severely.

'Oh, I suppose you expect to have somebody in fits some day, Jue. Well, he'll be a fellow who has no sisters.'

'I wish you would be quiet, James,' said his mother gravely. She never called him Jim. 'Stephen is very much upset, and I think you ought to sympathise with him so far as not to make any noise to-night.'

'I don't suppose Steve wants me to be in the dumps as well as himself, mammy. I should say he will think you and Dahlia enough to bear him company in mourning; but I won't make any row. I have the whole of my notes of the last anatomy lecture to write out, and that will keep me quiet enough. What a rum go?—the subject was the heart, and you

girls ought to have seen what a pretty sight it was under the knife as it was sliced this way and—'

‘Do be quiet, Jim,’ cried the girls, in chorus.

Being in his first course of training for the medical profession, Jim was proud of his newly-acquired knowledge, and it was one of his wicked joys to make his sisters’ flesh creep with highly coloured descriptions of the work in the dissecting room, or with ghastly jokes about drugs and how he could dispose of the whole family without anybody being a bit the wiser. They scarcely ever dared to venture into his ‘laboratory’ as he called his little room at the top of the house, for it contained several skeletons of animals, ranged on brackets and shelves round the walls, and a human skeleton shut up in a tall box something like a small-sized old-fashioned sentry-box. Jim called this his sentinel, declaring that it would walk out and hug the first girl who entered to

disturb his things. But they had no desire to intrude into his chamber of horrors as they called his laboratory.

‘The smell is enough,’ Juliet used to say, ‘from all those nasty chemicals you are for ever messing with when you are not teasing us. I wonder mamma does not stop you.’

‘Mind your own business,’ Jim would reply, and some wranglings, more or less good-natured, would follow.

On the present occasion a look from his mother, and some kindly remembrance of Ruth and his brother stopped him.

Stephen had first tried to read, but amongst all his favourite books he could not find one which had the power of commanding his attention for a couple of sentences. Then he took his desk, resolved to seek comfort from Ruth herself. Her letters were all in it. There were not many of them, for they had been so

near each other that there had been few occasions for correspondence.

He handled them almost reverently now, and wished that there had been some truth in modern spiritualism ; for if love could give a title to hold communion with the dead, surely he had the power to summon the spirit of Ruth to come to him then, that he might see her and hear her voice again.

If that could only be ! There was no need to concentrate his thoughts upon her in order to work the charm, for she occupied them all. There was no need to pray for it. His longing, his yearning for any sign from her, formed the most devout prayer that ever came from a man's soul.

He was sitting with one of the letters open before him, his back towards the door. There was that strange quietude in the place which comes when sorrow too deep for words has fallen upon the heart.

Thinking about this spiritualism, wishing that it had been true, and smiling sadly at its vanity, he experienced a nervous thrill over his whole frame, when a soft, cold hand was laid tenderly on his. He did not look up immediately; in spite of himself there rose a vision of Ruth standing beside him.

He turned slowly, and saw a white, fair face with two wondering, sympathising, tearful eyes, gazing earnestly upon him.

‘Why, Dahlia,’ he said gently and smiling, ‘do you know you gave me a sort of start. I was thinking about ghosts, and as I did not hear you coming in, the foolish fancy crossed my mind that perhaps you were one.’

‘I hope you are not vexed with me for coming, Stephen,’ she said, nervously and tenderly; ‘but I could not rest. I could not go to bed until I came to speak to you. I know you are in sorrow and—oh, Stephen, I wish I could comfort you even a very little!’

She dropped on her knees beside his chair, and hid her face on the arm of it, sobbing.

‘Poor Dahlia!’ he said softly, resting his hand on her head. ‘You too are suffering. Tell me what is the matter.’

CHAPTER XVIII.

DOES SHE LOVE HIM?

TELL him what was the matter! How quietly he said it, and how kindly—just like one who being in trouble himself is the quicker in his sympathies with those of others, and the readier to give an attentive ear to the outpourings of their affliction.

He had no suspicion, then. He did not know what it was he requested her to do. Otherwise he could never have asked her to make confession of her love for himself. What dull stuff he must be made of, or how cruel he must be! No—she would not do him injustice. It was his absorbing passion for Ruth

which made him blind to the feelings of others.

His loyalty irritated her to a degree that she felt was very near the thin line which divides sanity and insanity. And yet it filled her with a fierce and unreasonable desire to win for herself the devotion he had given to another. But she was acutely sensible that such devotion was not easily won or often found ; and she was stung by the thought that when he spoke just now he showed that so far she had only obtained his pity.

Was it love which actuated her, or selfish interest ? A combination of the two, probably ; she did not know, but it was what she believed to be love now. She had no fixed principles to guide her. She told fibs when occasion seemed to require them, and told them to herself more frequently than to others. She meant no harm. She was swayed by the impulse or passion of the moment to do what

might be right or wrong, and when it cooled she was willing to direct its effect to her own profit.

She had been told that unless she married Stephen Meredith she would be left penniless. That drove her forward into the action she had taken. She had always liked him and was therefore very willing to think of him as a husband. Ruth stood between them. But it was only a joke to a born coquette to try to oust another woman from a man's breast.

Stephen was unconscious of all her arts, but her insidious flattery had its effect. He liked to have her near him ; liked to talk to her about his own troubles and especially about Ruth. Then the spirit of rivalry, the appearance of which is the sign for the noble nature to stand aside, goaded her forward until now, what love she was capable of feeling was given to him.

So, when Stephen spoke to her in that calm,

kindly way, which indicated how unconscious he was of anything but close friendship between them, she swallowed her sobs with a gulping effort, which was more painful to the listener than the sobs themselves. But she did not rise or speak.

‘Tell me what is the matter, Dahlia,’ he repeated. ‘You wish to comfort me: then you could not find a better or surer way of doing it than by showing me something I may do to make you happy.’

How easily she could have answered him—‘Love me; that will make me happy all the days of my life,’ and she fervently believed it would. But she could not say that yet. Her heart thrilled with pleasure at his words, and her thoughts darted into the future when she might tell him in some way how he could make her happy.

Stephen had no idea that he had already done her so much good. He saw her suffering

and offered instant help. To his mind real kindness is shown by the helpful act done promptly in the moment of need, not by the act done in philosophical calmness after due and methodical consideration of the rights and wrongs of the case, and mathematical calculation as to the proper time to step in. Those moved by sympathetic impulse may often err and suffer much personal discomfort in consequence, but they are more frequently successful in speaking the helpful word, or giving the needed penny at the right moment, than those who 'do good' on studied principles.

Stephen had at any rate spoken the most helpful words that could be found for Dahlia.

When she had quite subdued her sobs she lifted those innocent, inquiring eyes to his face, as she said earnestly, and yet with a spice of pretty timidity, as if half afraid the answer might dispel her cherished hope—

‘Do you really wish very much to make me —to make me happy, Stephen?’

‘I do indeed, and only want to know how to set about it. There will be a comfort to me in feeling able to do something for somebody. This sense of utter helplessness and uselessness is the hardest part of what I have to bear at present.’

‘Ah, I am afraid you cannot do what is needed to make me happy.’

‘I can try, at any rate, and am willing to try, for your sake.’

‘For my sake!’ she echoed with dreamy, wondering joy, lingering on the words. Then, more brightly, ‘Will you try to overcome this great sorrow which has befallen you? Will you try yourself to be happy?’

A pause; he rested his head back on the chair and closed his eyes.

‘How can I answer that? I know that other people have suffered what was as great a

loss to them as mine is to me, and have survived to enjoy the world and its ways. Very likely I shall do the same——'

‘Oh, yes!’ she cried eagerly as he paused; ‘time cures everything, and you will get over this and look well and be happy again.’

‘I suppose so,’ he replied slowly, meditating; ‘but I cannot tell how that may be brought about. I do not know that I have yet suffered the worst of my pain; that will come as day after day the fact is forced upon me that I can never see her again. There is not a book or a trifle in this room that she has touched that will not remind me of it and renew my vain regrets; there is not a pathway between this and Kemerton every step in which will not sadden me with memories of—but this is not trying to comfort you, Dahlia; this is selfish indulgence of my own grief. Let us talk of something else.’

‘We cannot talk of anything else when

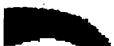
your mind is so full of one subject. I have been very miserable all day too thinking of it. I know it is no use ; I know we can do her no good by being wretched ; but when I think of you I am——. Oh, I don't know what to say, Stephen ; but I want to find some way of cheering you !'

'You must give up trying for the present,' he said, with a sad attempt to smile at her childlike eagerness to comfort him. 'If you cannot bear the sight of me I will try to keep out of the way.'

'You know that would be worst of all for —everybody to bear.'

'Well, we must wait. I will do my best not to distress you by my gloom ; but that is all I can promise. There, Dahlia, will you be content with that for the present ? I shall remember that you will be happy when you see me better, and maybe that will help me.'

Her head was bowed again : she did not



understand this man ; but she knew that she was being drawn closer to him by this new proof of the depth of his affections. And what could she do to obtain the first place in his thoughts now? What sacrifice could she make that would compel him to feel how entirely devoted she was to him no matter what happened? She was thoroughly in earnest. She believed that she would do anything for him, and at that moment the prospects of Suttee would have had no terrors for her.

There was one thing she could do, and she knew it was what would please him—besides it might be a protection to herself hereafter. She could be honest to him ; she could tell him the whole truth about how she first came to wish him to be her husband ; and if she told him now he would believe in the reality of the change which had come over her ; he would believe, what was true, that she was

ready to throw away the fortune if he would only love her a little.

Afterwards—what could she say or do that would convince him that all her tokens of love were not mere pretences, practised upon him because she feared to lose the money? Above all the conflicting thoughts and emotions which disturbed her there was the constant cry—

‘Will he ever care for me? Can he ever care for me, or is his heart drowned with Ruth?’

His voice roused her from the long waking dream.

‘What are you brooding about? Something unpleasant or you would look up. Can you not trust me with whatever it is?’

That decided her; if she should obtain his affection it should be honestly, and not because she wanted the fortune.

She raised her head again, and rose to her feet, resting her arm on the back of his chair so

that she could see his face, although he could not see her.

‘ You are right, Stephen, my thoughts were not agreeable ones. I was trying to answer this question. Suppose a person is obliged to pledge herself to keep a secret the result of which will be greatly to her advantage, and suppose after keeping her pledge for some time she thinks that it is wrong to keep it any longer, and that it would be more to her advantage to betray it—what should she do ? ’

‘ A casuist would settle that for you easily ; he would say, calculate the proportions of the relative advantage, and decide in favour of the biggest.’

‘ But what would you say ? ’

‘ Oh, my opinion is not worth much. But I would say that, having accepted the trust of a secret, you should regard it in the same way as you would the trust of money, and not part with it on any consideration, unless

authorised to do so by those who entrusted it to you.'

'But suppose that my fidelity to this awkward trust should present the possibility of my whole conduct being misunderstood by one of the people most concerned and one for whom I have a—a very great regard?'

Stephen looked up at her curiously, and sought aid from her face in understanding the proposition.

'You puzzle me. I am not clever in finding out riddles—especially to-night. But I should still say be true to your trust, and have confidence in the person you allude to—be sure that he or she will respect you more for your fidelity than for your treachery, even if that should be to his benefit.'

That was a point of view from which she had not regarded the question. She must be silent then; but if ever any misunderstanding on this subject should arise between them in

the future, she could remind him that she had been willing to sacrifice the fortune in order to be perfectly honest with him. At the same time it was perfectly clear to her that it was better for his sake that she should not throw away twenty thousand to gratify what was, after all, only the vanity of showing that her love was genuine.

It was one of her ways of proving to her own satisfaction that she was 'not a fool' to provide some ready explanation in the future for present equivocation, as:—'I would have told you all about it if you would have listened;' or 'I told you plainly enough but you chose to put your own construction on my words, and I was afraid to set you right, because you would be so much annoyed.'

In doing this she had no deliberate plan of deception in her mind, it was simply that she had a genius of prevarication within her, and could not help herself.

On this occasion, however, the better part of her nature was in full power, and struggling with the prevarication genius, and she made one last attempt to obtain leave to speak.

‘I wish you could understand me, Stephen. I want to tell you the secret that was entrusted to me, because I want you to—I don’t know what to say. Maybe it will be best to say that I want you to trust me, and that I do not care about breaking my promise if I can only be sure of that.’

He took both her hands in his, and, looking earnestly in her eyes which now met his frankly—

‘Then if you wish me to trust you, show me that others may do so. Show me that others may not, and how can you ask me to do it?’

He spoke so earnestly that she knew he had at least for that moment forgotten Ruth. It is not in ordinary human nature to feel proud of a triumph over the dead; but neither

is it possible for ordinary human nature not to feel gratified when it has succeeded in achieving an object much desired whatever may be the circumstances. She certainly did wish to make Stephen forget the disaster, and she had succeeded.

‘Very well, Stephen, I will be silent ; I will do exactly as you say I ought to do, for now—’

She paused, and looked at him with those big, innocent eyes, as if her whole soul were flashing through them to him.

‘Well?’ he asked kindly, helping her over the pause.

‘I want to do everything just as you would have me do it. Will you let me tell you when I am in a difficulty, so that you may direct me?’

‘Certainly my poor girl, if it will comfort you—for you know I should be glad to do that.’

‘And we may speak together about anything that happens,’ she went on, meditatively,

‘just as if—just as if we were brother and sister?’

‘Of course, Dahlia, but you give me the impression that just now you are not speaking to me as a sister, or rather, I should say, that you are not speaking to me quite frankly.’

‘That is true, Stephen,’ she answered dreamily; ‘I have not yet told you what is the matter. I cannot now, but some day I will.’

And she flitted from the room, leaving him alone.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE NEWS BROUGHT HOME.

THE first few days seemed long in their weariness: but Stephen was not permitted to indulge his grief. The affairs of daily life pressed heavily upon him, and many business transactions demanded his constant and serious attention.

His mother watched him with sad anxiety; he was so pale and worn that he appeared to have grown ten years older in as many days.

‘ You are killing yourself, Stephen,’ she said, as she watched him take a bundle of letters and papers which had just been delivered and begin mechanically to open them. ‘ Can you not obtain even one day’s rest? ’

‘Not at present, mother ; and it would be a pity if I could. The worries which are crowding upon me just now are my safeguard. I don’t think I could have kept my balance at all if things had been all right at home.’

The enforced activity was undoubtedly beneficial, and day by day he was conscious that he was waiting with increasing resignation for the details of the wreck. He had a morbid craving to hear everything that could be told of the unfortunate vessel and her passengers, although he knew that the account would renew his pain.

At last there came a brief message from Mr Bassnett.

‘The first mate of the *Eucalyptus* arrived in Liverpool to-day and will be here to-morrow. Have fixed twelve noon as the hour of meeting and will expect you. Rapier has just called and he says he knows the man, and we may depend on a full and clear account from him.’

So, then, a few hours more and he would see one who had been near her during the last moments of that fatal voyage; possibly this man might have seen her when the cruel waves carried her away.

He was impatient for the afternoon and night to pass; but he was not doomed to have to wait so long. Lewis Rapier again proved himself an active friend.

‘Send trap to meet last train. Have got McNeil, the mate, to come straight on, and am bringing him down with me to-night.’

‘He is an extraordinary fellow, Rapier,’ said Stephen, handing the message to his mother and Dahlia; ‘I don’t care about him, and yet he takes every opportunity of doing me a good turn.’

‘I think a great deal of Mr. Rapier,’ said Mrs. Meredith, pleased that her favourite should have done something to give her son satis-

faction ; ' and I never could understand why you were so indifferent to him.'

' I don't know myself exactly ; but he has certainly done me a real service this time. Do you not think so, Dahlia ? '

' I suppose it will relieve you to know the worst as quickly as possible,' she replied, but without looking at him, for she had a strong impression that it was not so much Rapier's anxiety to serve Stephen which had moved him in the matter, as his desire to remove at once whatever lingering hope there might be of Ruth having escaped.

Stephen himself drove to the station. He was there before the train was due ; and those few minutes of delay seemed the longest he had yet known. At last the lights of the train flashed in the deep cutting between the green banks a mile off. On it came, puffing and panting ; the lights of the station were turned up : the porters moved slowly about, as if they

had just been roused from sleep ; the few passengers looked indifferently along the line, and no one seemed to be in a hurry. The train came slowly into the station, bearing its message of fate for Stephen.

Rapier alighted before the train stopped and grasped the eagerly extended hand of his friend.

‘ I thought you would be here yourself, Meredith,’ he said, in a quiet, low voice. ‘ I hope you don’t think me meddlesome ; but I know from your mother how anxious you have been for the first definite tidings that could be obtained. So, as soon as I learned that it was McNeil who had arrived, I wired to him to come along by the first train, and here we are.’

‘ You have placed me under a heavier debt than I am ever likely to wipe out. Thank you, Rapier Is there any hope ? ’

‘ None. But here is McNeil ; he will tell you himself. He is very willing to do anything

for me, as I was able to give him a lift at a time when he was in a corner. You will find him an intelligent Scotchman, and you may depend on getting from him a clear account of all that happened.'

A smart, muscular young fellow, of about twenty-five years, stepped forward.

'I hope you are well, sir, but I'm doubting that you'll no be muckle the better for seeing me.'

'Jump into the trap ; at any rate I can congratulate you on having got safely back to land. Will you drive, Rapier ? That will leave me free to talk to our friend.'

They got into the trap, the mate and Stephen on the hind seat. It was strange that with all his eagerness to hear this man's story, now that he had him by his side, Stephen felt reluctant to bid him speak. Resigned as he was, and foolish as he knew it to be to give one thought to the possibility of Ruth having survived the

wreck, he shrank from the subject as if so long as he delayed the mate's report he still retained something of the living Ruth.

With a sense of great fear upon him, he put his first question—

‘I suppose Mr. Rapier has told you to some extent why I have such a special and painful interest in the loss of your ship?’

‘Ay, he mentioned that you were particular about Miss Clark. She was a fine lady and a brave one. There are no mony like her ; for when she kenned that it was a’ by wi’ us unless we could get the boats launched and manage to keep them afloat, she was as quiet as if she had been gaun to the kirk. Ay, sir, she was a brave woman.’

Stephen noted the gentle emphasis that was laid upon the ‘was,’ and bowed his head. After a little he spoke again very quietly—

‘Did you see her—at the end?’

‘I was one of them that helped her into the

ife-boat, and when it was stove in against the side of the ship I saw her and the others in the water.'

No use to ask more on that point: the mate's few words brought the whole scene vividly before him—the ship tossing about amidst the great waves; the attempt to launch the boats as a last resort; the calm, resolute face of Ruth as she obeyed orders, and helped others to obey them; then the crash of the boat and the disappearance of those who had been clutching at this straw of hope.

'You see, sir, it wasna just one storm we had had to do wi', but twenty of them, one hard after the other,' McNeil proceeded, 'and the ship stood out against them grandly. Now and again we had a sort of quiet day, and we did what we could to patch up; but it was nae use, for we had hardly got time to draw breath when another gale caught us, and we were waur than ever. Three days before that last storm

the skipper called us together, and a better skipper never stood on deck.

“Now, lads and friends, you maun keep up your hearts,” he said, “for if you lose heart there is little chance for any o’ us. But it would be wrong for me not to tell you that we are in a bad way, and another storm like the last will be a bad job for us.”

‘There were twa puir cr’atures in consumption that didna look as if they could have lived many days at any rate, and they were the only ones that made an outcry. Miss Clark looked after them and got them quieted, and there was a gentleman wi’ her that helped her in everything she did. She had been nearly washed overboard a while before this, only he gripped her in time, and they became great friends after that.’

‘Who was he?’ inquired Stephen.

‘Harrison, I think, was the name. He was a droll billie, and had got a special cabin made

for himself in the steerage, and for a week or twa never came out almost except at night ; but after Miss Clark's accident he was aye about as if he feared something might happen to her again.'

' And is he lost, too ? '

' Ay, they gaed down thegither so far as I could see.'

' That was what should have been my fate,' was Stephen's thought, and he envied the stranger who had taken his place by her side at the time of direst need.

' Three of our boats were carried away in the second storm,' the mate went on ; ' but we might have won through the worst of it if we had not sprung a leak, and the last storm came upon us before we could get it stopped. Then the mainmast went and our rudder was broken, so that there was no more chance of managing the ship at all. The skipper told us to get the boats ready. He was very particular about Miss

Clark and Mr. Harrison. They were to go with the two consumptive gentlemen, two of the steerage passengers and six of the crew in the first boat launched. Everything was going right with them when just as the lady had got in there was a wave sent her against the side of the ship, and the ship lurched over it, and it was a' by wi' them.

‘ We had no time for anything but to get out the other boats, and everything was done in good order. The skipper kept his place on deck, telling us what to do as steadily as if he was not thinking that his own hour had come. He had a sore trial when his guid wife crawled up beside him, and lay at his feet haudin’ on to a railin’, and refusing to come awa’ in the boat.

“ ‘ No,’ she said, “ if you bide here I bide wi’ you,” and she wouldna move.

“ ‘ Aweel, lads,’ he said, “ you maun look to yourselves and no heed us. We are twa folk that hae nae bairns, and we maun let the guid-

wife hae her ain way. . . . Puir Katie, you're taking your last trip wi' me noo."

'I saw them thegither on the deck as we put off, and it was against a' my notions of what ought to be to leave them there, but we couldna help ousels. We were a week in the boat afore we were picked up, and I got back to England as fast as I could.'

That was the whole story of the wreck, and it seemed so very simple that it was difficult for Stephen to realise that he was listening to the last account he should ever hear of Ruth.

Rapier had instinctive perceptions of the right thing to do under the most trying circumstances, which constituted a kind of genius. Even when it was his own immediate profit which was uppermost in the motive directing his actions, he displayed so much consideration for the feelings of others that it would not have been easy to show in what way he had taken any unfair advantage of them.

On the present occasion he knew that silence on his part was the greatest kindness he could show to Stephen, and from the moment when he took the reins in hand he did not open his lips until he pulled up at Derewood Grange. Then he pressed Stephen's arm as they entered the house, and whispered—

‘The worst is over, I hope, and you must have been prepared for it. I wish I could have brought you better cheer.’

‘You have done all that a friend could do for me. Of course I was prepared as much as a man can be for the confirmation of his worst fears.’

The arrival of the mate caused much sensation amongst the girls, and although his homely appearance somewhat disappointed their expectations of what this hero of the wreck would be like, still he was the hero ; he had come out of the storm, bearing its grim message of death for their home and for the homes of his comrades.

As for Jim, his interest in all that McNeil had seen and passed through rendered him oblivious of his brother's sorrow for the time being.

Mrs. Meredith, with the practical forethought of a hospitable housewife, had supper ready for the guests, and when it was over Stephen left the mate to repeat his story to the family.

Dahlia was the first to leave the drawing-room ; she was filled with strange terror by the narrative of the wreck and Ruth's fate, and as she was slowly ascending the dimly lighted staircase, she was startled by a quiet voice suddenly speaking in her ear—

‘Your time has come now, Miss Whitcombe. It will be your own fault if you are not mistress of Derewood within three months.’

Before she had recovered from her fright Rapier bowed and, smiling, passed swiftly down the staircase.

CHAPTER XX.

MR. RAPIER IS PUZZLED.

NEXT day Mr. Rapier and the mate of the lost *Eucalyptus* had to proceed to town by an early train in order to keep the appointment with Mr. Bassnett at noon. Stephen did not think it necessary to accompany them, as he could learn nothing further now.

He, however, drove them to the station.

‘I wish I could have stayed at Derewood for a few days,’ said Rapier, ‘even my presence might have been useful ; but the business I have in hand cannot wait. You may expect me down soon, though, unless you tell me not to come.’

He said this with the confident smile of one who knew the answer he would receive.



‘You shall be always welcome, and perhaps some day the Grange will be less gloomy than it is at present.’

As the train was moving out of the station, McNeil, who had been closely observing Stephen, turned to his companion with an uncomfortable expression of countenance.

‘I’m mair than half sorry you garred me promise no to tell him that I dinna actually see the boat go down.’

‘What on earth good would that have been?’ exclaimed Rapier in profound astonishment at this sudden exclamation of his friend.

‘I dinna ken,’ replied McNeil, dryly, ‘and I dinna ken precisely what for you were so pressing that I shouldna mention it. Wha kens how he might hae been cheered up by a wee bit hope.’

‘A hope that would only have kept him the longer in the misery of suspense. You know that the boat must have gone down, and that no

human creature could live two minutes in a sea which destroyed such a vessel as the *Eucalyptus*.'

'We *believe* she gaed down,' replied the mate cautiously and thoughtfully, 'but it was amaist ower dark for us to be sure in the confusion what cam' o' her. It's just possible that the wave might hae lifted her astern and clear of the ship. There hae been greater wonders nor that at sea, and ony way the puir sowl might hae had sic comfort as the hope could hae gi'en him.'

'Have a smoke, McNeil; your nerves seem to be a little unstrung by the wreck.'

'It was a tussle, but it's yon puir chiel that I'm wae for.'

Rapier regarded him with admiration, as they lit cigars and smoked vigorously.

'You are a good-natured fellow, McNeil, and I would like you to understand why I did not wish to hold out any vague hopes to

him. You know that I am his friend, and you could see that his family look upon me as their friend too ?'

'Ou ay, I could see that you were chief wi' everybody; but you were aye that wher-
ever I hae seen you.'

'Well, then, these good friends of mine are in some difficulty, and in order to put things straight it is necessary that Meredith should as quickly as possible give up thinking about the poor lady you saw drowned. His mother urged me to help them, and I know that I am doing them the greatest service by putting an end to his suspense at once. Now put yourself in his place and tell me frankly, would you not prefer to know the worst at once rather than be kept on hoping and hoping for weeks—months it would be with him—only to find in the end that your hopes were vain ?'

'I daursay I would like best to hear the

worst at once, if I was sure that it was the worst.'

Rapier took the cigar from his mouth, and looked curiously into the mate's puzzled face.

'Do you mean to tell me that you believe the boat can have escaped?'

'I couldna just say that.'

'If you feel in your conscience that you may say it, we will telegraph to Meredith from the first station we stop at; but if you cannot say you believe it, I say you would be doing a cruel thing to keep the whole family in useless suspense.'

The gravity and earnestness of Rapier's manner satisfied the man that it would be wrong to mention such faint hope as he himself felt, as, of course, it would be exaggerated by those who *wished* to believe in the possibility of their friends being saved, and so do more harm than good.

'Aweel, I daursay it'll be best to say nae-

hing about it, but the notion is in my head hat, considering we managed to warstle through ill we were picked up, the other boat might have done the same if it just got clear o' the hip.'

‘Yes, but the “if” makes all the difference to us. By the way, do you think that man Harrison, who was so much with Miss Clark, knew anything about the management of a boat?’

‘I canna tell; I scarcely spoke enough with him to be sure that he had ever been far at sea or no; but Harry Smith, our second mate, was there, and he was a clever lad, though he was a Cockney and cam’ frae Wapping.’

‘Oh! he was there, and Smith was clever enough to make you admire him in spite of his being a Cockney!’ exclaimed Mr. Rapier, smiling at the man’s prejudice, and evidently for some reason of his own pleased by the in-

formation that an experienced sailor had been in charge of the lifeboat.

‘Ay, he was clever ; he was wrecked three times afore.’

‘That ought to provide him with valuable experience. I wish you could have told me more about that passenger Harrison. Perhaps they can enlighten me at the office.’

‘Maybe—I canna. But let me say noo, Maister Rapier, there’s a thing I want to be perfectly clear atween you and me.’

‘Certainly—what is it ?’

‘Just this : I’m no gaun to tell that lee again about seeing the lady in the water. Everything else I said was true enough, although I didna tell a’ the truth as it seems to me noo I was bound to do.’

This was spoken with an air of dogged resolution, and the listener was aware that he had an obstinate character to deal with. He used the manner which is most persuasive

under any circumstances—that of frankness and sincere belief in his own argument.

‘Surely your conscience may be at ease on that score since you did see them in the water when the wave went over them, and you lost sight of the boat and all who were in it. That was the case, as I understand your account of it.’

‘Well, of course I did in a manner see them in the water, but you garr’d me say it in a way that put a different meanin’ on it.’

McNeil spoke slowly as one who feels that the argument he is compelled to yield to is wrong, although he is unable to put it quite right. The truth was that the cannie Scot had an uneasy feeling that somehow Rapier was leading him blindfold into a false position.

‘Nonsense, what other meaning could he put upon your words than that the boat went down, as you own you believe it did? What are you so nice about? You have done my

friend a greater service than you can guess, and you have obliged me. I fancy that should be worth taking into account. If our friends should turn up again, then we shall all rejoice; if they don't, then our mourning will be the sooner over.'

'That's true,' responded the man, still bamboozled, but now half convinced that, all things considered, he had done right in carrying out the instructions of his benefactor; 'and I'm not forgetting that I'm owing you something, sir.'

'I had no particular intention to remind you of that fact, but I'm pleased that you remember it. Upon my word, McNeil, I cannot understand your qualms of conscience, for I cannot see where the "lee," as you call it, comes in.'

'Aweel, aweel, sir, least said soonest mended, and we'd better, may-be, say nae mair about it.'

‘That is my opinion.’

In Mr. Bassnett’s office the mate gave his report of the wreck in the presence of the lawyer, who had full authority to act in every matter for Mr. Dotridge during his absence, and of Mr. Molyneux, the manager of the shipping business of Dotridge & Co. Rapier was present in the capacity of one of the confidential agents of the absent chief.

The account given was substantially the same as that to which Stephen Meredith had listened on the previous evening, with the addition of some particulars about the cargo and nautical details of the winds and weather which the ship had encountered. He had to speak entirely from memory, as no log or documents of any kind had been saved.

When the mate had retired to await further orders, Rapier inquired—

‘Is any message about this affair to be conveyed to Mr. Dotridge?’

‘I thought you were aware that no message of any kind is to be sent to him until he himself communicates with me,’ answered the lawyer.

Rapier bowed in a deprecating way, as if regretting that he had suggested anything that was contrary to instructions.

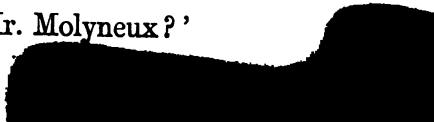
‘I only thought that as our friend was so deeply interested in Miss Clark, you might have considered it advisable to inform him of her fate.’

‘I might have thought so, too; but his injunction is positive and admits of no exceptions. For that matter I could not make an exception even if I desired, for unless you can tell me where he is it would be impossible for me to send a message.’

‘Then he has not yet written even to you?’

‘No: he has made no sign that he is alive.’

‘Nor to you, Mr. Molyneux?’



‘I do not expect to hear from him. My instructions are simply to accept Mr. Bassnett’s decision in all matters involving doubt or dispute, as if it were his own,’ was the shipping manager’s reply.

Mr. Molyneux was not disturbed either by the strange conduct of Mr. Dottridge or the loss of the *Eucalyptus*. The business under his control was flourishing, and the ship had been insured. Mr. Bassnett was interested on account of Ruth and Stephen ; for the rest, his course had been clearly marked out for him, and he had no thought of deviating from it.

But Rapier looked puzzled. As confidential agent it was awkward to have no means of communicating with his chief, for although he also had been directed to apply to Mr. Bassnett when he found counsel or further instruction necessary, he could not subject himself so absolutely to the letter of his commands as the others were able to do.

After a pause—

‘Can you give me any information, Mr. Molyneux, as to the passenger Harrison who had the special state cabin prepared for him in the steerage. Who was he? Where did he come from?’

‘We know nothing about him, further than that he was a very intimate friend of Mr. Dotridge, and that everything he required was to be done, no matter how much out of the ordinary way of business his requests might be. Our owner made himself directly responsible for all expenses.’

‘Oh! Mr. Dotridge gave him *carte blanche*, as it were, to do as he pleased with the vessel?’

‘It was pretty much like that, and, of course, his directions rendered it unnecessary for us to make any inquiries.’

‘Do you know when this Mr. Harrison went on board?’

‘I believe some time during the night before the vessel left Greenhithe.’

There was a flash of intelligence in Rapier’s eyes as if he were beginning to see light through the darkness which had bothered him.

‘Why are you so anxious about Mr. Harrison?’ queried Bassnett.

‘An idea has occurred to me, but it is so extravagant that I would rather say nothing about it until I have obtained some better assurance of its probable correctness than my own vague surmises can give. We shall have the other men here to-day or to-morrow, I suppose, and they will help me.’

He abruptly took his leave, and as he was driving to the Cosmos his chief thoughts took this direction—

‘If that should be Dotridge he can never survive the excitement of a shipwreck. Thus I can count upon his legacy. . . . If Ruth

should have been saved—the sooner that marriage comes off the better. . . . If she comes back and finds him married—humph! her fortune is a good one, although she knows nothing of it.'



CHAPTER XXI.

A YOUNG TOXICOLOGIST.

THE only change observable in Stephen was that he appeared to work with even more savage earnestness than he had been doing during the previous weeks. Up early and down late, finding a grim satisfaction in undertaking the most disagreeable tasks: he even tried his hand as an amateur butcher, and slaughtered some of his condemned cattle. They were the favourites of his stock that he chose should fall under his own hand.

Brain and hands were incessantly at work. The man was seeking distraction in thus desperately overtaxing his mental and physical strength. He had always felt extreme repugnance to a thorough investigation of the dis-

ordered accounts which had been left by his father ; he went into the matters now with fierce energy.

He felt no sickness now, as he discovered day by day how very deep in the mire of debt and difficulty the family was plunged. For himself he was utterly indifferent, for he had done with all care for fortune ; but he was still conscious of severe pain on account of his mother, his sisters, and brother. Well, he would do his best for them : he must live for that, and by-and-by, perhaps, he would find some gratification in it.

‘How is it to end?’ inquired the mother anxiously and often.

One day she was startled by the answer, given quietly and very gravely—

‘In a sale about the end of the year, unless our harvest proves the most extraordinary one that was ever known, and we reap gold instead of wheat and corn.’



That was a terrible blow to the poor lady.

‘A sale?—Oh, Stephen, it cannot be so bad as that!’ she exclaimed.

‘If I can avert it, I will,’ he said, ‘but the prospect of my being able to do so is not brilliant.’

There was a way in which he could easily avert it if he would, thought Mrs. Meredith, but she only said very gently—

‘I am sure you will, my poor boy, and I believe you will succeed.’

‘I’ll try, but do not be sanguine.’

‘At any rate I need not tell the girls yet.’

‘No, there is no need to darken their lives sooner than we can help. A few months of blissful ignorance may still be given to them. They know enough already to prepare them in some measure for the crash if it must come. Let them be happy while they may.’

She was tempted to speak out at once and remind him of what she had long wished, and

what she was able to assure him Dahlia wished—that he should accept the fortune which was ready to drop into his hand if he would only hold it out. But she was afraid of exciting him, for she had received a word of warning on that subject from old Dr. Humphreys, of Dunthorpe, who had been the medical attendant and friend of the family since her first baby was born.

‘He will work himself into a fever of some sort if he doesn’t take care. He looks quiet enough, but he shows as plain symptoms of a high state of nervous excitement as ever I saw. You must try to keep his mind as tranquil as you can.’

So she did not speak yet, but an opportunity to speak to some purpose was provided for her sooner than she could have anticipated.

Except that Dahlia was growing pale again there was no outside change in her. She exercised admirable self-control, and no one

guessed how she was ‘being wrought, perplexed in the extreme,’ so that she was constantly on the verge of hysteria. Whenever she felt that the nerves were getting too strong for her, she hid in her own room until she had overcome them.

The girls had quite made up their minds that now Stephen would, of course, marry Dahlia.

She did not see the certainty of it at all, and even Mrs. Meredith’s assurances that it must come to pass had lost the power to comfort her. Rapier’s words were constantly ringing in her ears—

‘Your time has come; it will be your own fault if you are not mistress of Derewood within three months.’

She with keener instinct knew that Stephen was thinking less about her now than he had been doing for a little while before the news of the wreck had been confirmed by the mate.

Formerly her only question had been 'Can I win him?' But she had been touched unawares by a nobler sentiment, and now her question was—'Will he ever care for me? Can I ever make him care for me?'

As she watched him day by day the dismal answer thrust itself upon her—

'No, he can never care for me—his heart has gone down into the sea with her.'

She went into the library one day and saw him with Ruth's portrait in his hand, and some of her letters open before him.

She went out again without speaking, and he had been so much absorbed that he had not observed her entrance or exit.

He had not spoken of Ruth to anyone since the visit of the mate, McNeil.

Dahlia's face became cold and hard for a moment as she stood in the hall, her hand still resting on the handle of the door. Then she went quietly upstairs, but not to her own room.

She climbed to the top floor and knocked at one of the doors.

‘Come in,’ shouted Jim.

She entered the laboratory of the future M.D., F.R.C.S., &c., &c. Dust and confusion were the distinguishing characteristics of this sanctum. Books, papers, bottles of chemicals, apparatus for experiments, skeletons of cats, puppies, mice, and one weazel, botanical and geological specimens, littered the shelves which occupied one side of the room and the deal tables which were arranged in the best position for the light.

Jim himself in an old coat, which Stephen had called the coat of many colours—it was so covered with stains and singes of various hues—was busy watching something he was heating in a retort.

‘Hullo !’ he exclaimed, ungraciously, when he saw who was his visitor; ‘I thought it was

young Humphreys. He promised to come up this afternoon. Ain't you afraid ? '

' No, Doctor Jim,' she replied with a pleasant smile. ' If you please, I want to consult you.'

' Gammon—you want me to do something for you.'

' I suppose people always do when they consult a doctor ! '

' There, you've made me spoil it again.'

Notwithstanding his contempt for the sex, he was not beyond the reach of flattery, and it was agreeable to anticipate his future dignity and to hear himself called ' doctor.'

' Spoil what ? '

Thereupon he became important and desirous of displaying his knowledge, but was still unable to avoid his sin of exaggeration or to overcome his habit of talking nonsense when addressing any of the girls—for Dahlia was in his regard only one of the sisterhood.'



‘ You have made me spoil a beautiful experiment for testing vegetable poisons,’ he began bombastically. ‘ You must understand that the vegetable poisons are most difficult to detect once they have passed into the animal system and been absorbed by it. Now, I am on the highway to a discovery which will be just as good as the philosopher’s stone to me, for it will make my fortune, and your coming in has upset my whole day’s work.’

‘ Oh, what a pity—I am so sorry ! ’

‘ Of course you are. That’s what a woman always says when she has put a fellow out, and thinks it enough to make all square again:’

‘ But you can do it over again, I hope.’

‘ I should think so, or I would open the sentry box and order my sentinel to come out and take possession of you.’

‘ You might let me see you doing it.’

She spoke very sweetly and persuasively ;

but he only looked at her with an expression of mock horror and amazement, as he exclaimed—

‘What! do serious work with a petticoat beside me. . . . Well, I always thought you had a little sense, Dahlia, but I give you up, too, after that. Haven’t you wondered why we fellows don’t want women to come pottering into our learned profession?’

‘I am sure I don’t want to enter any learned profession,’ she said, demurely.

‘That counts one for you, and I am sure you will understand me when I say that our reason is because if they were to get in amongst us it would be all larking and no learning—for, you know, it is only a few fellows who are proof against woman’s wiles’

He looked as if he were convinced that he was one of the select few.

‘I believe you would be proof against—against the greatest beauty that ever lived.

But tell me about your experiments, Jim. What is in these bottles—poisons ?'

She had come close to him, and pointed to a row of bottles on the table.

‘Some of them; but they are mostly metallic poisons.’

‘And what is that one in the big bottle ?’

She pointed to a large bottle, on the label of which was written in large letters, POISON.

‘Ah, that’s the most deadly one of all, only you have to take a considerable quantity of it. They say thousands are killed by it every year, and nobody is the wiser.’

‘Dear me ! And is it a vegetable one ?’

‘Yes.’

‘And—I am quite interested, Doctor, by all the knowledge you are giving me—do people who take it suffer much ?’

‘That depends,’ he answered, grinning.

‘Some people rather like it.’

‘There is strychnine, I see, and aconite.

There has been a great deal in the papers about them. Do they cause much pain ?'

'Horrible—most of them do. But what was it you came to consult me about? I am going over to Calthorpe, and want to start soon.'

'I had forgotten,' she said, lifting her hand to her cheek; 'you have made me forget it, with your talk and experiments.'

'Forget what?'

'The toothache. Can you give me anything to relieve the pain?'

'Have it out,' was the unfeeling counsel.

'I can't do that; at any rate, I don't want to do it if I can help it. Have you nothing that will stop the pain? Although it is not troubling now as it was when I made up my mind to break the rule and come up to your den, I am afraid of it coming on again.'

'You might try a little laudanum, or you might rub some aconite on your cheek.'



‘Can you spare me some?’

‘I can give you some of the laudanum; but mind you don’t swallow it,’ he added, laughing, ‘or you will get me into a scrape may-be.’

‘Don’t be afraid; I shall be very careful. Thank you so much, Dr. Jim. You shall be my physician-in-chief after this day. I wish you would let me come up and see some of your experiments.’

‘I mean to put my sentinel on double duty in future. Do you want him to come out now?’

‘What a wicked creature you are, Jim!’ she said, as she departed from the dusty laboratory.

Jim shut up his books and started for Calthorpe.

One of the things which Mrs. Meredith strongly reprimanded was spoiling a good

dinner by keeping it waiting, and this was so well known that her own people were pretty punctual. Yet here they had been all waiting for more than ten minutes, and Dahlia had neither come down nor sent a message that she was not coming.

‘Go up and tell Miss Whitcombe that we are waiting for her,’ the good lady said at length to a domestic.

Presently the latter returned and there was a scared look on her face.

‘I knocked four times, mum, and Miss Whitcombe didn’t answer, and the door is locked on the inside.’

She did not say that she had peeped through the keyhole as well as tried the door.

‘That is most extraordinary,’ exclaimed Mrs. Meredith; ‘she must be ill—perhaps fainted. I will go myself.’

She went upstairs. In a few minutes a bell rang violently. A servant ran up and

down again breathless with this message for Stephen.

‘You are wanted upstairs, sir, and the ladies are to stay here until the missus comes down.’

Stephen found his mother standing at Dahlia’s door, clutching the handle to support herself, her face pallid with fright.

‘For God’s sake, Stephen, burst open the door at once. Something has happened to her !’

He knew that the door was too strong to be burst open by one man’s strength. He procured a hatchet, broke through the panel above the lock, and was then able to turn the key.

When mother and son entered the room they halted a moment, horror-stricken and dismayed.

Dahlia lay on the bed, breathing heavily, at brief intervals moving slightly as if in pain, and gasping. Her face was distorted and discoloured, as if she were being suffocated.

Stephen unfastened her collar, and opened her dress at the neck. Then he sponged her face and head with cold water.

‘It is a fit of some kind. Tell Smalley to saddle the mare. You take off her things and get her into bed, whilst I go for the doctor.’

The mother uttered a short cry of alarm.

‘Stephen ! Stephen ! she has poisoned herself !’

‘Good Lord ! what new trouble is this come upon us ?’ he muttered, as he took the bottle on which was a label with the word ‘POISON.’

‘What is it ?’

Mrs. Meredith was trembling, and her voice shook as she put the question.

He smelt the bottle and drained a few drops of the liquid it still contained on to his tongue. Then he answered—

‘I cannot tell : it is some spirit ; but her



breath smells of laudanum. If Jim had been at home he could have told us. Give her plenty of milk—that can do no harm and may do good. I shall not be more than half an hour gone. Get two of the girls up to help you, and don't let the servants know more than is necessary.'

He placed the bottle in a drawer and started for Dunthorpe. Never had the mare been ridden so hard before, but it bowed its head with good will to the work. The dusty road was becoming rapidly more and more dark, but the rider had no time to spare for any thoughts of danger.

Fortunately he found Dr. Humphreys at home, and that good man, although he liked his dinner and his placid *siesta* after it, in order to save time mounted Stephen's mare and rode off on it, whilst its owner followed fast in the Doctor's gig.

When Stephen entered Dahlia's room again

he was relieved by the report which Dr. Humphreys had to give him.

‘You need not alarm yourself, as she is coming round. Leave her to your mother and me in the meanwhile. I will come down shortly and report progress.’

‘Take this with you, Stephen,’ said Mrs. Meredith, handing him a sheet of note-paper which had been folded, but not enclosed in an envelope. ‘We found it under the pillow when we were putting her to bed. I know it is intended for you.’

There was something almost stern in the utterance of the last words as if she were accusing him of being the cause of this misfortune.

He was for a moment perplexed when alone in the library he read the contents of the paper; then astounded when he associated them with his mother’s words and manner.

The writing was in pencil.

'I can only live for you. As that may not be, I wish to die.'

'Do not try to stop me or to save me. Be kind to me in this at least, and grant my prayer.'

'I love you, and I die because you can never care for me.'

What madness was this that was coming upon him? Ruth dead; Ruth who had gone away, in spite of his prayers to stay with him when he most needed the sustaining power of her love!

And now, here under his own roof, Dahlia dying because he could not return her love!

Oh! there was something monstrous in this complication. It was too much for one poor wretch to bear.

CHAPTER XXII.

ONLY ONE OBJECTION.

IT was rather late—eleven o'clock—when Jim got home, and he was surprised to see so many of the windows lighted. The whole household was still afoot, and the youth entered wondering what could have happened.

Juliet explained the cause—that Dahlia had attempted to poison herself: and Jim grew pale with fright as he cried—

‘Is she better? Why didn’t you send for me?’

‘The Doctor says she is better and believes she is safe; but he is still with her. I suppose Steve thought it was better to bring the Doctor than his brother, who, however clever he may

be, can scarcely have so much experience as a physician of Dr. Humphrey's years.'

'Oh, I didn't mean that, Jue,' and, indeed, there was not a gleam of vanity in his look or voice. 'I only meant that perhaps I could have told them what she had taken, and that would have helped the doctor.'

'And how could you have told?' exclaimed the girl, opening her eyes wide in amazement at his anxiety rather than at his professing power to give assistance.

Jim groaned.

'Because I believe she got it from me.'

'From you! Oh, Jim!' cried Juliet and Constance together—Mary and Lavinia, being the elders, were still with their mother in attendance on the invalid.

'Yes, and I'll be hanged if she dies. She came to me this afternoon, wanting something for the toothache, and I gave her, a little laudanum—not enough to kill her, though; but

if she took it all at once it might make her sick.'

'Run and tell the Doctor now,' advised Juliet.

A sudden thought struck the youth with new fear.

'Was she very bad?'

'Dreadful.'

'Then she must have gone to my room and taken something else. She kept on asking me about poisons all the time she was with me. Won't I catch it from Steve!—he has so often scolded me for not locking the door. Give me a candle.'

But he did not wait for his sister to get it. He ran to the hall table, snatched up one and mounted the stairs, bounding over three steps at a time, followed by his two much-alarmed sisters.

On the top landing, with trembling hands he struck a match and lit the candle. Bursting into his laboratory he went straight to the table

on which stood the bottles Dahlia had been so curious about. He lifted them one by one and laid down each with a gulp of relief that was like a stifled sob.

By the time he came to the place where the large bottle had stood his sisters were behind him. The bottle was gone ; he stared at its vacant place and the expression of terror which had been on his countenance rapidly developed like the transformation scene in a pantomime from gloom to bright sunshine.

He laughed—instantly clapped his hand on his mouth to suppress the sound. Then he snapped his fingers and danced round the room with joy.

‘Have you gone mad?’ queried Juliet, not knowing whether to be indignant with him for keeping the joke whatever it was all to himself, or to rejoice with him.

‘Mad—mad as a March hare with joy. She has been here, but she has taken the——’

‘What are you stopping for?’

‘Well, it will be best not to let the thing go any farther. Besides professional etiquette compels me to carry any information in the first instance to the Doctor. But it’s all right —Dahlia wont die and I won’t be hanged. Hooray! May-be the scare she has got will do her good. She has been looking considerably blue for weeks past. Now, then, clear out. I don’t want you to be trying on any larks of this kind; but I’ll take care not to leave the door unlocked again. Run, and tell mother it’s all right.’

‘She is still in Dahlia’s room.’

‘Oh, then the Doctor will tell her.’

After carefully locking the door, he gave the light to his sisters and bounded down the stairs.

‘I want to see the Doctor immediately,’ he said, when his sister Lavinia opened the door of the bedroom, ‘and ask him to bring the bottle that is labelled poison with him.’

Presently Dr. Humphreys came out and Jim led him into an adjoining room.

‘What is it, and why do you want this bottle?’

Jim’s eyes brightened at sight of his lost property.

‘I wanted to tell you that it’s all right, sir. She took that bottle from my room and——’

‘Well, what did it contain?’

Jim lowered his voice.

‘I thought you would not wish anyone besides ourselves to know? I have not said anything to my sisters.’

‘That was right.’

‘There was nothing in it but a portion of some spirit in which I had been preserving a still-born puppy because it was so small. I marked poison on it for a lark, because that’s what all good T.T.’s call spirits, and because I have heard of tippling servants making free with doctor’s spirits.’

‘This is a great relief to my mind ; thank you. What quantity do you think remained in the bottle ?’

‘About two gills.’

‘But she had opium besides.’

Jim repeated the story of the afternoon, and the load of anxiety was entirely lifted from the Doctor’s shoulders.

‘This is a narrow escape,’ he said, at last, ‘and it should be a warning to you throughout your life, and I hope it will be one to the foolish girl herself. Hum ! we had better say nothing about the puppy ; she will be upset enough when she comes round, and that would only make her worse. Indeed, we had better keep the secret between ourselves. I will simply assure them that she is safe.’

‘But Stephen will insist upon knowing.’

‘Of course you will tell him, but no one else.’

‘You can trust me, I won’t. I suppose she will be all right in a few hours.’

‘She will be out of immediate danger ; but she will not be well for some time. I suspect the poison she is suffering from is in the mind and has little to do with the stuff which she took from your den. However, we must pull her through as quickly as we can.’

The Doctor now knew how to act ; and happily the measures he had adopted were precisely those which he would have used had he been aware from the first of all the facts of the case. Now he had only to prescribe profound tranquillity, tonics, nourishing diet, and as soon as convenient, a change of air.

He saw Stephen before leaving, and was able to assure him of the patient’s perfect safety.

‘I should advise that the incident be kept as quiet as possible,’ said the good-natured old Doctor, ‘for every reference to it will be of necessity painful to Miss Whitcombe, and retard her recovery. It might even tempt her to

repeat the rash act, when the consequences might be more serious than they are in this case, thanks to the mistake she made as to the nature of the stuff she was taking. I know it is difficult to hide these things. Servants will talk, and gossips do get hold of our private affairs with most bewildering rapidity. However, you must do your best to keep it from her ears.'

'You may depend on that.'

The gig was waiting, but the Doctor lingered as if he had something more to say, and yet hesitated about doing so.

'I am afraid you must give me the privilege of an old friend to touch on a delicate subject, Meredith.'

'Go on.'

'Then the counsel I would offer is that you should not see her for a few days, when her nerves will have recovered a little tone. Her first utterance was your name; and now that she has come to herself she seems to be most

disturbed on account of what you may think of her. Send some kind message, but don't go to her unless she asks you to go. In that case go at once. Now, good-night.'

Dahlia's recovery seemed to be slow, more because of her reluctance to quit her room than because of actual weakness. She was afraid almost of the daylight, and could not endure anyone to be near her except the faithful nurses Mrs. Meredith, Mary and Lavinia.

Stephen's messages were brought to her regularly, and were her best medicine. By and by as the spring days grew in brightness, and buds, and leaves, and blossoms gladdened the eyes and filled the heart with a sense of new life, the Doctor suggested that Stephen should ask to see the invalid.

From this Dahlia shrank, terrified. It was Mrs. Meredith who brought the message, and she would not have taken 'No' for answer, even

if it had been spoken. But Dahlia, dressed in a loose wrapper, and seated in a large chair by the open window overlooking the garden, and, with a long stretch of rich undulating landscape beyond, only looked afraid of the ordeal.

‘But it must come sooner or later, child,’ said Mrs. Meredith, ‘and you must feel that he is anxious to see you after all that has passed. Upon my word, I used to think he was unkind to you, but the positions are reversed now.’

‘You know it is not that,’ said Dahlia feebly, her cheeks flushing; ‘you know how glad I would be, but——’

‘There, now, no more buts. The Doctor says it would do you good to have a talk with him now; or with anyone who would afford a change of conversation and so rouse you up.’

‘Then, let me see anybody else first,’ pleaded the girl, and yet not meaning it.

‘What is the use of saying that? You won’t see anybody else—you won’t see Mr. Rapier,

who has been constant in his inquiries about you.'

'Does he know what happened?'

'No; be at ease about that. No one but ourselves is aware of anything more than that you had a fit whilst dressing, and have had a fever.'

'You have been very kind, all of you.'

'Very well; there is Stephen in the garden. I am going to bring him in at once.'

'Not yet, not yet; give me a little time to prepare myself.'

'You will have time enough for I have a few words to say to him before he comes in. I wish he could see you just now; you are looking prettier than ever. Now you must not deny me to-day, or I shall conclude that you no longer wish to see him. There he is; accustom your eyes to the sight of him as we walk up and down. Mary will stay till we come back.'

She looked from the window, and saw that he was making up a bouquet of spring flowers.

She knew that they were for her. No longer wish to see him ! How little they could understand the wild craving there was within her to touch his hand again and to hear his voice !

Presently she saw the mother and son together. She knew that they were talking of her, but she could not catch even the sound of their voices.

This was what they were saying—

‘ You are to come in to see Dahlia to-day, Stephen,’ were the mother’s first words to him ; ‘ but before you go in I want to have a few plain words with you about her and yourself. Let us walk up and down here.’

‘ As you please, mother. What tyranny are you going to practise now ? for I know by your face that you meditate something dreadful.’

‘ Yes ; I am going to call to my aid the tyrant common-sense ; but you know he is only a tyrant to fools, he is the friend of sensible folk.’

‘ I see, he is my tyrant and your friend.’

The mother knew that he, as well as Dahlia, was recovering by his return to his old playful way of speaking, which she had so long missed.

‘It will depend upon how you act now whether he is your friend or tyrant.’

‘I would like to have him as a friend, for we have much need of his help.’

‘I am glad to hear that, for it is just what I think. Now, I am going to speak my mind plainly, and once for all. The subject is your marriage.’

He bowed his head on his chest.

‘We must have it out now, my poor boy, and if I pain you I suffer myself with you,’ proceeded the mother affectionately. ‘You wanted to have Ruth, and I did not like it; but I did not make much fuss about it. You know that?’

‘Yes.’

‘I wanted you to have Dahlia Whitcombe,

and you did not care about that arrangement ; but I did not worry you by urging my plan upon you, although I knew how devoted the girl was to you.'

‘Yes.’

He pronounced the monosyllable mechanically, as if his mother's delicate pause forced it from him without his reflecting faculties having anything to do with it.

‘I have none but kindly words to speak of Ruth, if we speak of her at all. I do not think we should.’

‘No.’

‘She is gone—you cannot mourn for her always, and you owe something to Dahlia Whitcombe for all she has suffered on your account. I have not asked you how you were affected by those lines she wrote when under the belief that she was dying, but you cannot be my son, Stephen, if your heart was not wrung with pity and remorse.’

‘It was indeed.’

‘Then go to her now—make her happy—make us all happy. It is in your power.’

Stephen lifted his head; he had returned from dreamland to the practical world. His eyes were clear; his manner calm and deliberate.

‘I have thought over the whole position long and earnestly,’ he said. ‘I should be glad to do anything in my power to make Dahlia happy, and feel myself free to do it now in the way you wish but for one objection.’

‘What is that?’ she asked, eagerly, delighted by his words, and satisfied beforehand that whatever the objection might be she could remove it.

‘Her money.’

‘Don’t be a fool, Stephen; who ever heard of that being an objection to a pretty and good-hearted girl? Ridiculous!’

‘No—not ridiculous. Everyone will say it

was for that I married her,' was his bitter exclamation.

The mother laid her hand gently on his shoulder.

'I understand you, so will all who know you. Not one of them will say that or think it; and for those who do not know you will you sacrifice her? She at any rate does not think it, and she has given you a terrible proof of it.'

Stephen took his mother's hand, and the cloud which had for a moment darkened his face cleared away as he looked at her.

'You are right, mother, and I see common-sense is to be my friend through your influence. She has given me proof that her happiness is in my hands. I will go to her and tell her I accept the trust.'

CHAPTER XXIII.

SPOKEN AT LAST.

SHE had seen them coming towards the house, and knew that he would be in the room in a moment.

Yet he was there beside her before she thought he could have had time to reach the hall door. His hand was on her shoulder—the blood was tingling in her cheeks, and throbbing in her brain making her giddy. She was trembling and yet she was warm; she was delirious and yet his touch soothed her.

He was going to speak; instinct told her what he was going to say, and she was half afraid to hear it now that it was on his tongue.

‘I have been very blind, Dahlia. . . . You

have been with me through this time of bitterest trial, and have been my best comforter. That makes you dear to me as no other woman ever can be now.'

She clasped his hand, and her head rested on his arm. She could not speak.

'We are fellow-sufferers, and I have been unawares the cause of much pain to you. Do you think you can forgive that in looking forward to the years I shall devote to the endeavour to make you happy?'

A long, sweet pause, and then she with her eyes closed, as if fearful that the ecstasy which was thrilling through her would suddenly change to pain if she dared to look up, or move, or breathe, said softly—

'Yes.'

Then he stooped and kissed her.

That was all. No need of explanation between them. Everything was understood, and she lay in his arms, his betrothed wife.

Neither quite realised the position yet ; but both felt happy ; he because he experienced that most delicious of all sensations—the knowledge that he had been able to bring sunshine into one sad life ; she because she loved him passionately, and knew that he was now all her own—her own more completely than he could have been in her jealous eyes if she had won him whilst Ruth lived.

Suddenly she opened her eyes, and with a scared look cried—

‘ Oh, Stephen, I have been so wicked ! ’

‘ Hush,’ he said, gently ; ‘ we have forgotten all that. We shut our eyes upon the past, and we two join hands to go out into the great future in quest of the treasure happiness.’

‘ Shall we find it, do you think ? ’

‘ Some say that it is never found in this world ; others that we can only get glimpses of it. Some again cry out that they possess it ; others that they have never known it and never

hope to know it. The wiser people say that happiness, like water, has one level, and everybody has an equal share.'

'I am very happy,' she said, closing her eyes again as if to realise it the better.

'I too am happy since you are so.'

Another pause, once more broken suddenly by her—

'And now you know what was the matter with me that time you asked me, and you know why I could not answer. I loved you, and was miserable because I could not comfort you enough.'

'But, indeed, you did comfort me, Dahlia; and I have been always grateful to you.'

'Ay, grateful, but there, I mustn't speak of that. But we are to forget the past —*all* the past, and some day you will perhaps —there again,' she cried, laughing at her own joyous forgetfulness, 'how greedy I am! You will be angry with me, and be wearied with me,

because I will be so eager to have all your life as part of mine.

‘And it shall be all yours now.’

The news went through the household as if there had been a telephone at everybody’s ear; and it sped almost as fast throughout the district: Stephen Meredith and Dahlia Whitcombe were to be married in June.

‘A good catch for him,’ said the gossips, ‘and she has a tidy fortune, too. He is a lucky fellow, young Meredith. I always knew it would be a match.’

The Derewood girls were in ecstasies, and immediately over head and ears in the agreeable troubles of dressmaking and millinery.

Jim shrugged his shoulders and would have nothing to say in the matter further than—

‘I thought Steve was in for it, poor chap ! Well, she’s a good sort.’

And that was a great admission for him to make.

Both Stephen and Dahlia agreed that the wedding should be entirely private, and, much to the chagrin of Juliet and Constance especially, it was settled that there should be no guests except Mr. Bassnett and Mr. Rapier, who were both in a manner representatives of Dahlia's adopted father, the still absent Mr. Dotridge. The latter had left full directions regarding settlements so that Stephen was spared the necessity of having to interfere in regard to them. One-half the lady's fortune was secured to herself and children—if any; the other half was left free for joint use of husband and wife.

Dahlia was very busy, but what appeared remarkable to everyone was that she showed scarcely any interest in that most important item of a woman's career, the bridal dress. She insisted that it should be quite plain, and that was all she cared about it.

Her private thought was that she would like Stephen to feel from the begin-

though she had been fond of dress she had, in that respect as in others, greatly changed.

He was pleased ; for he did like simple and plain attire for women as well as men. Ruth was the model always in his mind's eye for dress and everything else. Perhaps Dahlia remembered that, for she was most anxious to please him.

A bright sunny day in June, and the little party drove quietly to the church. The old vicar, Mr. Arnold, officiated. But, quiet as they wished to be, there was a crowd of people from the town and the surrounding hamlets to watch the bridal party, and the children of the labourers on the Derewood farms strewed flowers along the bride's path.

At last the words which made them one were spoken—nothing could part them now.

The crowd cheered as they passed from the church to the carriages and as they drove away.

On reaching Derewood Grange Mr. Bassnett, who was quite juvenile in his festive attire and in the sunshine, offered formal congratulations to the bride and bridegroom in the name of Mr. Dottridge.

‘Although we know nothing about where he is,’ said Bassnett, ‘his arrangements are so marvellously complete that he had even prepared for this event. I have the greatest pleasure in handing you this bit of good news, Meredith, on this joyful occasion.’

Stephen opened the letter which was handed to him and found that it was a formal intimation from Bassnett that all the mortgages held by Mr. Dottridge over the estates of Derewood Grange were cancelled.

This was good news indeed. By one stroke of the pen his cousin had made him an independent man.

‘But how can I accept this from him?’ he exclaimed, in amazement.

‘By remembering that he is your relative, and that you have married the lady he adopted as his daughter,’ answered the lawyer, cheerfully. ‘It ought to help you to be all the merrier on your marriage day.’

‘I told you that Dahlia would bring good fortune,’ whispered Mrs. Meredith, with tears of pride and joy in her eyes. ‘No more thought of a sale now, Stephen !’

‘No, mother, but this seems almost too good to be true.’

‘You must remember that Mr. Dotridge owed something of his start in life to your father.’

‘Then he has amply repaid it to the son. But it is a strange business.’

Strange it might be, but it was only part of the strange conduct of an eccentric man, and it certainly made Stephen’s heart lighter on this bright day.

The usual ceremonials which are irksome

to everybody, except mothers-in-law and young ladies, were observed with all due formality at the luncheon. Mr. Bassnett proposed 'the happy pair,' and wandered into such flowery language as would have cost him every client he had if he had been overheard.

Mr. Rapier was charming about the ladies and the whole duty of man to marry. Juliet declared she never had heard anyone speak 'so beautiful!'

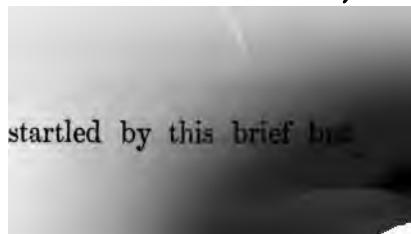
To that Jim said 'Bosh! Why don't he marry himself when he thinks it such a fine thing?'

The young misogynist was not to be reformed even by the spectacle of a wedding.

When they had run the gauntlet of all the old shoes in the house, and got fairly away, Stephen placed his arm round Dahlia's waist, whispering—

'My wife.'

She was quite startled by this brief but



eloquent address—the most eloquent to which she had ever listened.

‘We have begun our journey,’ he went on, ‘under very favourable conditions. We have fortune in our hands and at our feet, and it depends upon ourselves whether the journey is a pleasant one or not. I cannot conjure up the ghost of any shadow that might cross our way.’

‘Nor can I,’ was the gleeful, smiling response; ‘and we will try not to make one. There cannot be one; so long as we are true to each other, nothing can hurt us.’

‘And we shall be true.’

That was a little second service; and both remembered it afterwards.

The shadow was closer to them than they would have believed had a prophet told them.

They were going North, and their first halt was made at York. In the hotel, whilst Stephen was waiting for Dahlia to complete her

toilet for dinner, he picked up a newspaper, with no intention to read, but merely from habit. His eyes rested on this paragraph—

‘A melancholy relic of the ill-fated *Eucalyptus*, which foundered at sea some six months ago, has been washed ashore. It is a wooden box bearing this inscription: “Ruth Clark, passenger to Sydney per *Eucalyptus*.” The box has been forwarded to the agents of Dotridge and Co. at Sydney, and will doubtless be transmitted by them to England, to be delivered to the friends of the unfortunate lady.’

Stephen laid down the paper as his wife entered the room.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.









